

## **ONE VOICE CAN TURN A MOB**

**By Marie Coady**

**With three cats and one rather large dog, I am a frequent visitor to the pet supply store. The other day I was in a hurry as usual, careening into the parking lot and zipping into a parking space only to scurry up to the entrance to get in and out as quickly as possible. About half way to the door, I noticed I was in a footrace with another frenzied woman. We didn't look at each other, but it was obvious one of us would have to yield or we'd collide at the entrance.**

**Since I was a millisecond faster, it was up to me to decide which of us would cross the finish line first. That's when I made a strategic decision and graciously swung the door open, stepped aside and allowed my competitor to take the gold.**

**She was stunned. A wide smile broke across her face and our eyes met for the first time. She gasped and said, "Well! This is a pleasant surprise. Does this mean I have to tip you?"**

**"No," I said, "This one's on the house."**

**I felt good about not competing for first place in a meaningless competition with my fellow man. I didn't want to be responsible for sending someone on to the rest of their day thinking society had lost all sense of civility.**

**Yet there was a time not too long ago when even a trivial gesture of politeness would be looked upon with suspicion. In the height of this incivility, it seemed everyone was full of hate and ready to strike. Hate was in and if you didn't agree you were condemned. I often felt we were reliving the Salem Witch Trials.**

**It all came to a head for me one day a few years ago at the Woburn Cinema, during school vacation. My son and I had decided to take in a movie. I can't even remember what was playing, but just as the lights dimmed and the music rose, a loud whistling sound echoed under the seats and exploded with a hollow bang at the front of the theater. People screamed and jumped out of their seats.**

**Two rows behind, two young teens giggled and slid low in their seats trying to make themselves smaller, no longer proud of their accomplishment.**

**The projector bopped and flipped to a stop, and the theater manager came, flashing his emblem of authority as the culprits feigned disinterest and turned to each other with smirky, pretended puzzlement.**

**"They did it! They shouldn't get away with it!" a vigilante voice rose from the**

other side of the theater.

The response was as instant as an electronic town hall as others joined in, ready to settle the score. The youthful manager became infected with the anger of the crowd. He loomed above the shrinking offenders and reached down, grabbing them, pulling them out of their seats.

"Get them! They should pay!" the vigilante shrieked. The crowd closed in for the kill. It was a frightening lesson in mob psychology.

I sat beside my son, trained by previous attempts at civility like Pavlov's dog, looking straight ahead determined not to get involved.

But our seats were in the thick of the action and as the posse grew, they seemed to surround us pressing against our seats and trapping us in the heat of battle. As the crowd closed in, they circled the miscreant boys, poking and jabbing at them, getting ready for a gauntlet of anger-releasing furor.

Suddenly, a voice rose from the back of the theater.

"I'm a witness here," was all she said.

But the intensity of those words hit their mark and tapped a spirit in me I thought had been snuffed out. Those words also offered another point of view. Something to chew on, mull over, give pause to.

I found myself rising out of my seat almost involuntarily and saying, "They're only boys. What they did was wrong, but it's not a hanging offense."

My son was mortified. He sunk low in his seat, anticipating a violent reaction. Instead, the mob just looked at me as if they were emerging from some sort of social coma. They backed away, silently returning to their seats like robots.

The angry woman, who precipitated this potentially volatile situation, looked at me as if I'd betrayed her.

"My father committed suicide when I was a child. He blew his brains out with a shotgun. I heard the blast. I hear it everyday of my life. You don't know what that sound does to me," she sobbed.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "But that's no reason to hurt these two boys. Let the authorities handle it. That's what they're trained for."

She sat down reluctantly, but she did sit down.

Just then the police arrived and brought the boys out to answer for their foolish act. That's all it was, a foolish, stupid, naive prank. Something boys do

until they learn to be men, but they shouldn't have to die for it.

That was then and this is now, thank God. I think we're on our way back to civility again. You can almost feel it in the air. Why don't each of us try a little of it on for size in 1997. It could be contagious.

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