

2017 Elie Wiesel Competition

1st Place Senior Essay

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Absence of Empathy

A swastika is drawn on the inside of a train, along with anti-Semitic slurs. The crowd that gathers onto the subway stands at first unmoving, shocked and unsure of how to proceed. One would assume that the scene being described took place in 1930's Germany, and not in the city of Manhattan in 2017. The fact that the plagues of anti-Semitism, racism, and all other forms of discrimination can still run rampant in our society after so many years, and so many opportunities to learn, is nothing short of heartbreaking. However, though unfortunately not always effective, speaking up about the horrors of the past is the only prevention we have from slipping into a complacent forgetfulness of the lives lost due to hate, and our only way to combat anything like this from happening in the future.

When I was maybe 8 or 9 years old, my family took a day trip to Washington, D.C. My parents surely meant well, but the decision to visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum produced in me a never before seen episode of significant emotional strife. I'd known what the Holocaust was in the abstract, in the way that all children "know" about tragedies; yet do not really grasp their unspeakable sadness and resulting individual suffering. Eight years later I can still recall in an almost perfect detail one exhibit, an endless room to my child size self, filled with discarded grey shoes piled up in a too big pile, each pair representing someone now dead. I can even remember the smell. It was terrible. I hated the feeling of fear and sadness it produced, I hated the feeling of being aware for the first time how inexplicably appalling humans can be. I hated the feeling of helplessness. I walked through the rest of the exhibits without reading them, not wanting to know, putting a metaphorical hand over my eyes and ears to protect myself from being unhappy. This was of course very selfish, but in my defense I was 9, so I hope you can find it in yourself to forgive me.

Disproportionate amounts of people go through life like this - ignoring tragedies that occur, turning off the news in an effort to avoid hearing stories that would produce a reaction, pushing uncomfortable knowledge to the back of their minds. The living embodiment of the phrase, "ignorance is bliss." This behavior is understandable among 8 year olds, but adults should conduct themselves in a higher esteem. Learning newfound unpleasant information can be uncomfortably illuminating, and relaying traumatic experiences can be excruciatingly painful. However, the troubles of pain or discomfort are infinitely better than pretending like a genocide never happened, thereby erasing the names and faces of the victims deserving remembrance. Creating a link of empathy among two human beings ensures a respectful humane relationship follows, and when this type of relationship doesn't come naturally due to discriminatory external forces, it can be forced by causing both parties to simply view the other as human. If Hanns Loewenbach's schoolboy friend had not briefly remembered that he too, was a person, he wouldn't have secured Hanns the passport that would go on to prevent him from being imprisoned in a concentration camp, and most likely save his life. Sharing experiences with others is the most basic way to reaffirm a person's humanity, and at least for a second snaps people out of

their self-centered lenses. In the monstrosity that was the Holocaust, it wasn't only the severe anti-Semitism that ended up taking the lives of millions of Jewish people, but the overwhelming indifference of everyday citizens. Too many merely stood by and watched as their neighbors were taken away to death camps, not even attempting to undergo any plan of action at all to abate the genocide taking place in their own backyards. This event was able to occur because of the absence of empathy residing in the hearts of the onlookers, stemming directly from ignorance, (self-inflicted or not) to the true horrors that were taking place at that time. When a person's story is presented, in all its gruesome genuineness, empathy is produced, and it is no longer possible to avoid the truth. The metaphorical hands over the eyes and ears disintegrate. In the absence of empathy, there can be no change. In the absence of empathy, there is no justice.

Despite of the seemingly never-ending and evolving forms of discrimination, I do not believe humanity is naturally prepositioned to be bad. In times of plight, it can seem as if compassionate people are drowned out in a sea of malevolence, but however outnumbered they may be, moral people always exist. Countless lives were saved in the Holocaust due to a conscious decision to put oneself in danger to help a person in desperate need, to accept the consequences of a crooked law to do what was so obviously right. It's when our society appears most bleak and hopeless, that we need to remind ourselves that there is not a shortage of good people. When one tried to discriminate based on race or religion to keep an entire subgroup of people from finding refuge in our borders, thousands flooded to protest at airports. When one shouts, "keep them out!" someone is always going to be there to scream, "Let them in." And when a swastika is drawn on a train in Manhattan, someone will always be there to wipe it off. And when it seems like no one is, then that person must become you. As humans, we have to protect one another. And when there is an absence of empathy, we have to remind each other that everyone has a story, and remind ourselves to share those stories, because only then will everyone be treated with the deserved basic human respect.