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Tragedy's Simple Psyche

The cry of “never again” resounded strongly after the horrors of the Holocaust. Tragically, no more than a few decades passed before the unthinkable recurred, testing the power of that resolve—“never again”. Now the cry is merely a murmur, an undertone, as post-WWII genocides sweep broadly by. We ask ourselves how it can be that such blatant murder goes unnoticed. The answer, in part, may be that we cannot cope with what is obvious and massive. Genocide is too broad to feel—to empathize we must individualize each death and personalize every tragedy. Tragedy itself hasn't had a face or a voice—the hum of mass death is too somber for the wind to carry. Sometimes it never even reaches our ears—sometimes the persistent hum arrives, but is turned away because we feel powerless to address something so much larger than ourselves.

Anne Frank, the girl who wrote, “Despite everything, I believe that people are really good at heart,” remains an inspiration as one who lit that proverbial candle, rather than cursed the darkness. In her, we mourn the loss of a distinct and faith-filled individual. Likewise, when we learn about the Holocaust in elementary school, we learn in terms of one character in a storybook: this is the story of Peter, or his wife, or his son. “Seeing is believing,” and in order to believe we have assigned to tragedy many individual faces—but they are still too many. We have never understood that aside from the faces of those who have suffered, tragedy herself is an entity and has a face and a voice and a heart that beats unnoticed. We have labeled her an enemy and willed her not to strike, but she, too, is a victim who must be offered compassion. “Love conquers all,” according to Virgil, and love begins with understanding.

The face of tragedy is too seldom looked upon, and her voice too seldom heard. Perhaps, along with our cries of “never again,” the best way to ensure this resolution is to speak the vow to tragedy's face, to hear her voice in reply, and to promise her we will listen. As Thoreau said, “It takes two to speak the truth—one to speak, and another to hear.” Tragedy waits to speak. Only when we fulfill our role in truth by listening can we understand how to prevent her from continuing through life unheard.

She might tell us that it is essential for society to value and keep compassionate knowledge. When voices speak, no matter how softly, no matter what age, color, gender, or religion, they remain voices. Voices must be heard. Policies and politics of isolationism tell us to dodge our consciences, and guide our attention away from the moans of genocide. These practices defile the unconditional value of life.

The earth is one community. We have sectioned ourselves off into countries and

cultures, labeling third-world countries with signs of “Do Not Enter”. But the people who live behind those signs, who do not get the benefits of individualization, are of course just as human as the rest of the race. The voice of tragedy springs from seeds planted in every place on earth. She lives in every country, and sound waves can cross all borders. The perception that maps divide people in the same way they divide geographical locations is flawed: if we hear voices rise from the sites of hate crimes, borders must relent. We are all mortal—we feel common pain and common love.

The nature of tragedy, then, is always composed of the same substance. Her psyche is relatively simple. It emerges from the common air, and is not so very far away. We must teach all humanity to identify potential tragedy before it can occur. The old, wise wispy-haired face of the Holocaust tragedy was once an embryo; she was allowed to grow unnoticed until, for many, it was too late. Our children must be taught to learn the sound of this voice from the past and detect it whenever and wherever it speaks again in the future. We all must identify the seeds of heartbreak before they have a chance to germinate and take root.

The voice of tragedy demands a decision of us. Once we have learned the sound of that long and low-frequency hum, we must decide, individually and collectively, to ignore the lines on the maps that legitimize and protect those who inflict human pain. Ever since the term “genocide” was coined in 1944 in reference to the Holocaust (Lemkin), Cambodia has played host to the “killing fields” of the 1970s, Rwanda has sought to eradicate the Tutsis in the 1990s, and Darfur has become the new name for genocide in 2004 (Genocide Timeline). We have seen photographs of rib cages that stab through stretched skin, detached limbs that grasp for help, and dead eyes that follow us. We cannot help but know: “Seeing is believing”—and now we have even more ways to see.

It is in the basic nature of mankind to be “our brothers’ keepers”, and we *want* to keep him—*one* person, whose troubles we can afford to take on. We all possess, retained from our purest state, human decency: the largest problem arises when moral people acknowledge horror, but turn away from it assuming there is nothing significant one person can do. We quiet our conscience by considering our agreements with the United Nations and the International Campaign to End Genocide (Genocide Watch) – but this is not enough. We need eyes worldwide to watch for the seeds of terror when they appear. Before victims begin to groan of their catastrophe, that low hum must be met by a steady worldwide alarm that cannot be ignored.

Isolationism has no place in a world without borders, where love and tolerance bloom freely. Invasion is senseless when there are no separate countries to invade—there is only aid given freely to a neighbor. It was Mahatma Gandhi, perhaps the greatest peacemaker in history, who told us, “Whenever you are confronted with an opponent, conquer him with love.”

The face of tragedy includes all elements of mankind in her features, and so she contains evil as well. When we vow to personalize and empathize with tragedy, we cannot avoid individualizing and understanding evil. But especially there, in those seemingly bottomless eyes of tragedy, we also find the flicker of hope: what we acknowledge, we can conquer.

This may be what the voice of tragedy would tell us if we would only hear her speak. Stanley Baldwin wrote, “War would end if the dead could return”. It is absolutely essential that people hear victims before they are forced to rise from the world of the unheard to beg for our attention. We are *all* the face of tragedy, and we are all her voice. To hear it, we must look to the entire world, and also within ourselves.

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