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The Time For Change

Genocide. While we are familiar with the word, none realize the extent to which it impacts their daily lives. While the majority are fortunate enough to never have had to experience genocide and the physical, emotional and spiritual hurdles that come with it, many have. During the 20th century, atrocious mass killings such as the Holocaust, Cambodian genocide, Rwandan genocide, and the Bosnian War occurred leaving many with both physical and emotional wounds or trauma. However, these resilient survivors and their powerful memories teach valuable lessons about the future. As they share their stories of survival, they remind future generations of what they can do to make a difference and ensure that through their memory of the past, such horrific events will never occur again. Four important survivors: Daniel Trust, Aaron Elster, Maja Kazazic, and Loung Ung demonstrate immeasurable courage by sharing their stories and what they faced as they survived disaster in their home countries. Through their memory, it is imperative that we learn from them and apply their teachings into making the world a place of tolerance and love.

Daniel Trust, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, tells his powerful story of what it was like to escape the war. A dispute between two tribes led to genocide in the country of the Tutsi people. Daniel lost his parents and sister, witnessed his mother's death and was unable to do anything as his house was burnt down in flames. He was left alone and abandoned with nowhere to go. To his fortune, a man rescued him and hid him in his home until it was safe to go to the neighboring country of Congo for refuge. However, reaching Congo was not a relief at all. Once reunited with distant family, he was still often beaten and abused both physically and emotionally. Thankfully, an organization eventually helped his sister arrive to the United States and he came after her. Arriving in this country was its own challenge as he didn't know anybody

or speak the language, but through his perseverance, he became an honor student. He returned to Rwanda once for his brother's funeral, a time that helped him make peace with his past. He mentions how lucky he feels to have been the one to survive, and for this reason, he started the Daniel Trust Foundation. This organization gives back to students in low income communities by helping them with their education and honors teachers who have gone above and beyond to make an impact in their students' lives. Daniel sends several messages, one being that of forgiveness. He chose to forgive those who had wronged him, something he mentions is not easy. Along with that, he epitomizes the concept of the "American Dream." One of his main goals is to remind the younger generation that the American Dream is still alive if one works for it, and that newer generations have so much potential that can be used for anything. Most importantly, he believes this potential can be used to spread peace and love and change the world for the better.

Aaron Elster, author of *I Still See Her Haunting Eyes*, discusses his experiences during the Holocaust. The book, written in the perspective of his 10 year old self emphasizes the difficulties young children endured in this time. The Holocaust was a time of persecution of the Jews by the Nazis who were led by Adolf Hitler. Millions of Jews were sent to extermination camps or work camps until their final days. Aaron, a young boy was forced to live in a ghetto - a closed, discriminated community of Jews until eventually he found himself on the way to a concentration camp. His father urged him to escape, and so he was forced to leave behind both his father and his little sister, Sara. His older sister, Irene was sent to the home of the Gorski's, the place where he eventually found himself. The Gorksis showed very little compassion to Aaron, who lived in the attic for over a year. There was barely enough room to move around, which he wasn't allowed to do, in fear of being caught. When the city was later bombed by

Russians, he was taken to different camps where he eventually found his uncle and a way to get to the United States. It took him a while to get used to the United States but his life here has improved dramatically. The main takeaway Aaron develops from his story is to never be a bystander. In a situation where malice and hate are being encouraged, it is the duty of the next generation to stand up and do something about it as the future lies in our hands. While he does not preach forgiveness due to the painful loss of his younger sister, he does emphasize that nothing is solved by hate and thus, it is the responsibility of the young generation to stand up to it, not stand by it.

Maja Kazazic is a survivor of genocide and war in Bosnia. Bosnian Serbians were committing an ethnic cleansing resulting in the death and injury of many. Maja was a 16 year old girl hanging out with her friends when a grenade exploded outside a building where she was standing. The grenade was only five or six feet away from her, killing all of her friends, and critically injuring her. There was no food, water, electricity or medical help in the area which she was staying so she was taken to a makeshift hospital - a basement full of those who were injured or dying and needed immediate attention. This hospital was both humid and unsanitary as many people were simply lined up in the basement. She saw many die because they just gave up. However, she did not give up even as infection set into her leg and it had to be amputated without anesthesia. She was a good soccer player, so medical workers told her she would only lose her toes but she woke up to her leg being cut off. She fought and fought, coming close to death many times. Eventually, a woman named Sally Becker came to rescue three children from the hospital, and to her fortune, she was one of them. She was able to get proper medical attention and survived despite the pain she faced. Her past is what motivates her, and as she says, she has to keep moving forward for the people who sacrificed to get her there. She founded One Story, One World, a website for people to share their stories. She believes in the power of resilience and wants all people to know that if they view their problems as difficult, they will seem like Mount Everest - impossible to overcome. But, if they break them into smaller steps,

they will get somewhere. In this way, it is important to her that people do whatever they can, even if it is in small steps, to keep moving forward and to bring hope to the world.

Loung Ung, a survivor of the Cambodian Genocide, shares her story of arriving to the United States and escaping the killing fields. She was raised while Cambodia was in the middle of a war, but still saw her home as a beautiful place, full of life and full of culture. She has three sisters and three brothers, a family of 9 who lived a wonderful life until the day that Communist soldiers stormed into her city and told her they must evacuate in 72 hours or risk being bombed. Little did she know at the time that this would cause 20,000 Cambodians to lose their lives and millions to be displaced. Soldiers moved them to villages, like labor camps, where they worked everyday. Anyone who disagreed with the government was considered a traitor or enemy of the state and was crushed or purged. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, and all potential leaders were collected and executed. She learned quickly that she had to become invisible to survive, but that was impossible as she was of mixed race and impure, defying the vision of the government to create a utopian society. Her father was taken first, leaving her siblings and her mother behind. Three months after his departure, her mother forced her and her siblings to leave as well, excluding her youngest four year old sister. They finally reached an orphanage, where she was taught to use guns for people on the outside and take them out before they did the same to her. Her mother and sister were taken as enemies of the state a year after. She soon found her way to America but she did not speak English. With help, she made her way through high school and college, became a citizen and an advocate for children who were affected by landmines in Cambodia. She had to return to Cambodia in order to help these children, which she wasn't sure she could, but she had to choose to stand up because of how much survivors of the war had to sacrifice for their survival. While she also emphasizes the power of standing up and doing something, the most important lesson she shares is that the human heart is the strongest muscle

in the body. It has the ability to heal despite anything it encounters. And while she has experienced some of the worst of humanity, she emphasizes that humanity also has its best and that will always triumph.

All of these survivors had significantly different experiences as they survived genocide in their country and found ways to escape and improve their lives. All showed incredible resilience and willpower to overcome whatever obstacles were thrown their way. They did have their differences in understanding and takeaways. As an example, Aaron Elster says he would never forgive those who had done this to his family, but Daniel Trust was able to completely forgive those who harmed him and his family. Despite these differences, they all share a powerful commonality. All four survivors emphasize the power of the younger generation and the responsibility that is in the hands of those who will live to see the future. As Loung Ung says, the younger generation has some of the best of humanity. As Maja Kazazic says, they have the power to create hope, one small step at a time. As Aaron Elster says, they have the ability to stand up when they see pain and suffering and do something about it instead of being bystanders. And as Daniel Trust says, it is the potential of the young generation that will bring love and peace back to this beautiful world. Every survivor had a different experience. Some escaped with the help of others, some escaped alone. Some were forced to live in inhumane conditions, others left behind families and friends. But, their message is that the power is in the hands of the next generation to improve and change the world. As a part of the young generation, it is up to us to combat hatred in this world and bring about peace, love and happiness. And it is our job to ensure that through the memories of the past, we can bring about a better tomorrow.

Works Cited

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