

A Place Of Reflection
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*****Author's Note: This piece has come together over several months. With the help of my wonderful NeWP group writers, I have been able to craft something that I am proud of and ready to share with my students. Over the last 8 years, I have spent a great deal of time studying human rights issues due to the experience I mention in this piece. It is very much a part of who I am as a human being and as a teacher. My students are writing "This I Believe" statements as part of their final project this year, and I look forward to reading what they have to say and sharing this little piece of myself with them as well.**

"There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice,
but there must never be a time when we fail to protest."
~Elie Wiesel~

I didn't know the door I was walking through would open into the dark waters of human rights and the study of man's capacity for evil. Anthropology students like me spent time learning about human behavior, how behavior changes with time, how behavior is environmentally shaped, and how behavioral adaptation is the key to survival. When an associate professor encouraged me to sign up for a Forensic Archaeology class as an interesting deviation from traditional anthropology classes, I registered for it primarily to satisfy a curiosity about the study of the contextual issues surrounding death. I didn't realize what I was in for when I walked through the door of room 104 in Bessey Hall.

I didn't really understand or appreciate what I was getting myself into, and by the time the light switched on, it was too late, and I was in too far. Waves of hate crimes, ethnic cleansing, Janjaweed and Jihad, Hutus and the Holocaust, Tutsis, and the Taliban crashed down on me, and hushed voices of the victims pulled me under. I was exhausted, frustrated, and confused. But mostly, I was infuriated. How could these things exist and I not know? I was angry with myself for my ignorance, and I remember crying. The tears weren't for them. They were for innocence lost in those moments of realization. They were tears of anger for the sheltered upbringing in which I had been raised, but in that same moment, they were for blessings of being raised in that shelter. They were for guilt, and for the selfishness that was nurtured by this "blessed" life. Though I would have denied it before, I at last recognized my white privilege.

For whatever reason, this sudden realization triggered one of my worst childhood memories. At an early age I learned a hard lesson about the consequences of power when it is negligently used. When I was 7 or 8 years old one of my chores on our ranch was to take care of the baby chickens. On a hot day, I made a choice to ignore my mother's instructions about watering them properly. I did not water them with the proper dispenser; instead, I placed a pan in the coop and led them all to a watery death. They marched toward the pan of water, fell over the edge, and drown in the very water that was supposed to nourish and protect them from the heat. I killed dozens of chicks because I didn't want to be inconvenienced; it was a quick solution to my problem, and the consequences of that choice were emotionally devastating to me. I first had to bury all those the innocent baby chickens, and then I had to rebury them when our family dog repeatedly dug them up. Each time, it was a reminder of the crime I had committed against life. I recognized what I had done, but didn't really comprehend the power I had just exercised. I was just a little girl whose choice had consequences. As I got older, I continued to make powerful choices that affected others in negative ways, but again, in my immature youth, I didn't see the truth about my decisions.

In high school I quickly realized there were “pretties” and the “uglies”, and life was much happier if you were one of the “pretties”, so I did all I could to become one of them. In accomplishing this status climb, I felt powerful. Being one of *them* meant security and popularity. It meant identity. That kind of lesson was real, and at the time, it was logical. What I learned through my years in high school was that this security is fragile. People can turn on you in a moment, and I became first a bystander, then a perpetrator, and finally, the victim. I would say now that I got what was coming to me at that point in my life. I should have known better. I was taught to **BE** better, but the power of acceptance was more tempting. I recommitted myself to changing my behavior and becoming a better person. These childhood experiences were foundational lessons in my life, and after I finally learned them, I thought I stood on solid ground. I didn't realize the real “ah ha” moment wouldn't occur until I registered for that Forensic Archaeology class in college.

It was in the middle of this tumultuous time that I discovered the story of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. After reading his books and researching his life, I felt a sense of peace. It was a peace that for once did not stem from blissful ignorance, rather, from faith and conviction. I remember his words...“We must speak”. It was so easy to get sucked into the whirlpool of frustration and depression as I spent that semester studying about war criminals, war tribunals, and the aftermath for victims of these human rights atrocities. I read his writing and realized that not only did I believe him, I felt led to do what he spoke about. At that particular point in my life my faith in God was fragile, but as I read Wiesel's thoughts on God, I began to think about my own. Was God speaking to me through him? Does He have a plan for me? What is my purpose in this world? I realized that I was craving some sort of direction in my life. I was ignorant about how little I knew about life, ignorant about how much power one holds in their hands, ignorant about what power could actually do to people. I was ashamed for not using my own power to serve others over myself.

Now, eight years later, I write this reflection after returning from the amazing opportunity to visit the Holocaust Memorial Museum and meet a courageous and passionate survivor Helina, who is the very embodiment of the strength of the human spirit. The verse from 1 Corinthians comes to mind as I try to make sense of the journey that led me to this place in my life. “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” Thirteen years after the lives of dozens of innocent creatures were taken due to my childish carelessness, I traveled through a horrific multisensory depiction of the darkness of humanity. I heard, felt, and saw what can happen when power goes unchallenged. This experience has burdened my soul to continue to fight against injustice, and to refrain from the blindness that leads to these atrocities. The place I find myself now is one of trepidation. I fear what may come if the human community does not heed the cries for help screaming from the borders of ravaged countries or remember the haunting whispers of those whose voices have already been silenced.