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Why Not Me?

As I stand in the hallway with my friends before class, talking about homework and the basketball game last night, I see movement out of the corner of my eye. I see a boy walking with his head down. He carries his books in hand, ignoring the jeers of the people lining the hallway. As he walks by, another boy, brimming with self confidence, trips the boy. He falls, his books flying everywhere. Everybody laughs. The bell rings, the hallway empties; as the students leave, they step on the boy's papers, rumpling them further. I watch as the boy begins to pick up his papers, a look of resignation on his face. I know I should help him, but I think to myself: "what will the others think of me? He's almost gathered them all; my assistance won't help him anymore." I watch as he scurries to class before turning to go; not a victim, or a perpetrator, but a bystander; I watched it happen, but I did nothing about it

Sadly, this scenario is not only in occurrence at my school; it happens all over the world. We have all been educated about how to stand up to bullying, yet few do. The reason for this is simple: most of us are too concerned with our own image to stand up for victims who may be different, unpopular, or misunderstood. We convince ourselves that this is a part of life; there is nothing we can do about it. We watch, not approving of it, yet doing nothing to stop it. The tendency to quietly stand by and allow things we disapprove of to happen is not unique to my generation; man's passive nature has plagued us since the days of Adam and Eve. As Martin Niemoller captures in his poem: "First they came for the Socialists and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and

there was no one left to speak for me." Sixty five years ago, most people were aware of what was happening to the Jews, Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, and mentally disabled, yet they chose to stand by; they were too worried about getting tortured themselves, so they chose to ignore the cries of those in need. They were, like the students in the hallway, bystanders to a horrific crime. Many acts of violence and discrimination happening today are due largely to the fact that people fail to acknowledge both the history of the Holocaust and the acts of injustice occurring around us today.

The Holocaust was a horrifying event in history. The countless amounts people who were robbed of their identities, torn away from their family, and tortured by Hitler's soldiers had their lives tragically altered due to his arrogance. For many, the Holocaust is difficult to hear about. It makes us uncomfortable to hear about the gassings, the forced deportments, and the attempted annihilation of an entire people. If we are to prevent similar events from happening in the future, we need educate ourselves about this horrific occurrence. We need to teach ourselves about the stories of Tova Friedman, a child survivor. It is important that we learn about how she and so many others suffered; how they were torn from their families, betrayed by neighbors, and made to live in small, camps unfit for human life (Friedman). Ignoring the facts and disregarding the stories will only lead to similar disasters. If we persuade ourselves that this is all just a scary story, who is to say that this event, this mass murder of eleven million people, is not going to replay itself again? Who is to say it is not happening right now?

Approximately 1.7 million people were murdered during the Cambodian Genocide in 1979 due to ethnic rivalry and unstable political power ("The Genocide"). In 1994, 800,000 Rwandan Tutsis and Hutus were killed due to mistreatment of the minority Tutsis by the majority Hutus ("Genocide in Rwanda"). Even today, people are being tortured and

mentally damaged by people in positions of power and their common neighbors. Since 2003, there have been 300,000 Africans killed in Darfur and over 2.5 million displaced by government-sponsored militia ("Genocide in Darfur, Sudan"). Statistics are not people, but people contribute to these statistics. A Rwandan woman, Prisca, lived during the Rwandan Genocide. The Militia attacked her husband and Prisca ran to hide with her children; she was followed and raped by the militia ("Rwandan Stories"). All the people in these stories are real. They are victims to acts of genocide occurring now, years after the Holocaust. It seems impossible that after the Holocaust we would allow this to happen again; when will we learn from our mistakes?

In retrospect, the solution seems simple: if we educate ourselves about the Holocaust, we may begin to feel how horrible it was and have the sense not to let it take place again. Yet it *is* happening again. Today, tragedy is occurring all over the world. It takes the form of the displacement in Darfur, of racial violence in South Africa, and even bullying in schools where I, myself, take part. Simply educating ourselves about the Holocaust is not enough to end discrimination. It is a start, but it will not end wars or stop inequity. In order to end these things, we need to join together and find our voice. We need to hear and act on the words of Elie Wiesel: "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation" (Wiesel 118).

Together, with people from other races and cultures we can speak out against discrimination and violence, and we can begin to reverse the injustices taking place. As I was doing a service project this past summer, I was able to work with people who looked different from me. This reinforced the notion that I had heard before: no matter what people are like on the outside, they are alike on the inside. If we forge relationships with people different than ourselves and we realize that "our differences are less important than our

similarities" (Hall), maybe we can turn the heads of a handful of people, and they will turn the heads of a handful of people, and so on. One voice will lead to many, and one change will lead to more. If you throw a pebble into the middle of a lake, the ripples will span out until they reach the edges. If one voice speaks out, the words may surge outwards, reaching the very edges of the world. As Henry Friedman said, "We are all different; because of that, each of us has something different and special to offer and each and every one of us can make a difference by not being indifferent." So let us all throw our pebbles, let us all share the stories, let us all "be the change we wish to see in the world" (Gandhi).

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