

EXCLUSION: Words can have terrifying impact on actions

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involve seeking a greater sense of stability, acceptance, importance, or security. If we are lucky, we may move for simply aesthetic reasons — wanting more space, more modernity, more grandeur. Yet much of humanity moves out of necessity — perhaps for financial reasons or eviction, but also for safety and survival.

My maternal grandmother was born in Warsaw, Poland. Her father was a physician and professor at the local university while her mother stayed at home. She was raised Roman Catholic, was afforded a top-notch education, enjoyed the arts, and travelled often.

On September 1, 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland. My grandmother was 15. While not Jewish, she and her parents were targeted as “intellectuals.” She was relegated to the Warsaw Ghetto, then separated from her parents who were never seen again. Then, given her vitality, she was chosen for forced labor rather than execution. While details remain a bit of a mystery, my grandmother escaped the forced-labor camp, but while working for the underground in France, she was captured again by the Germans and imprisoned in Frankfurt for two years until the end of the war when she was finally liberated. There was not much left for her at home in Poland, and so my grandmother who spoke no English (despite speaking at least four other languages), made the journey to Ellis Island along with so many others seeking something better and the promise of Lady Liberty.

Somehow, out of such horror, my grandmother managed to make a life for herself in the United States. She married, had two children, settled in Long Island in comfortable suburbia, and later retired to a gated community in Palm Beach, Florida. Despite her unwavering resilience, it was not always pretty. The stain of the Holocaust brought nightmares and flashbacks, memories that compelled a quest to

numb or distract with alcohol, pills, and risky behavior. Her traumas became also her children’s traumas and while her reasons for absenteeism or emotional distance as a parent are understandable, they were not without consequence. This is one version of intergenerational trauma.

Last week I enjoyed a brief visit to New York. As I toured the Auschwitz exhibition at Manhattan’s Museum of Jewish Heritage, I was struck most by a photo of a German family with young children — they are laughing and enjoying a swim in their backyard only 400 feet from the crematorium that in sharp contrast was burning thousands of murdered bodies each day. How is this possible?

Desperation loves a scapegoat. After World War I, Germany was hurting — and hurting bad. The financial situation left over a third of the country unemployed and grasping for hope or purpose. Hitler’s vision not only offered a way forward, but an enemy that was much more tangible and familiar than the complexities of the country’s crisis.

“The art of all truly great national leaders at all times consists in not dividing the attention of a people, but in concentrating it upon a single foe.” — Adolf Hitler (1925)

One way to a sense of pride is through unification and another, through division. Hitler did both. He unified the “Aryan race,” and by convincing those lucky enough to fit this description that they were superior, he enhanced their perceived pride even more by justifying the ostracism and persecution of millions. Germany quickly became Europe’s superpower, dominating economically and militarily. German author Raimund Pretzel (1928), describes the intoxicating Nazi vision among the German people:

“They are terribly happy,

but terribly demeaned; so self-satisfied, but so boundlessly loathsome; so proud and yet so despicable and inhuman. They think they are scaling high mountains, when in reality they are crawling through a swamp.”

It is unsettling what we can become accustomed to — what we quietly accept especially when we ourselves are hurting. It can start small — perhaps with a suggestion or slur at the family table, then rhetoric spreads to groups, then to public acceptance of discrimination and segregation, then to widespread banishment and dehumanization, then somehow to mass genocide.

It is well known that being excluded has deep emotional consequences, but what do we lose when we ourselves are the aggressor of exclusion? We often do so to seek a sense of solidarity or significance with other aggressors. We want to belong — just as every human does. Yet, the method by which we are seeking belonging involves hate, denial, dehumanization, and anger. This demands a significant amount of energy, and detachment.

And, quite frankly, anger is toxic on the mind and the body. The pain we inflict on others becomes our path to prosperity, and reconciling this means we must create a worldview in which causing hurt is necessary. Ultimately, we create a very rigid and small world that must be maintained in order for us to have any sense of satisfaction. Problem is, this rarely happens, and we are often confronted, albeit maybe only on our deathbeds, with our legacy.

I write this not to make a political statement, but to remind myself and perhaps anybody who reads this that the seeds of hate are often apathy and desperation. It takes courage to acknowledge responsibility and look within

rather than seeking to blame another. Furthermore, I am reminded of the weight of our words. As I left the museum, I was challenged most by the following from Auschwitz survivor Simone Alizon:

“Our words are not your words. Ramp does not equal platform. Number does not equal name. Segregation or selection does not equal choice. Barracks does not equal building. And today words have the power. And it is also destructive. On the Internet, in discussion, on forums, in comments. In the media, titles, captions. In the groups of notions where the people who are poor, cringing, running away ... are presented as people with germs

and diseases. In the language of political debate, to demagoguery, in populism. In brutal opinions of those who, supposed to serve, want to lead. The words of hatred poison the imagination and stupefy consciousness. Maybe this is why so many remain silent while confronted with evil. The words of hatred create hatred. The words of dehumanization dehumanize. The words of menace increase the threat. We have already started paying for this. The camp is not just a memory. For the majority of us, its reality is omnipresent in our everyday life. I have never heard a more terrible warning. The warning against our own words.”

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