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## For Myself Only

*What was done was not of my doing. I had the feeling of a Pontius Pilate. I felt that it was not with me that the guilt lay.*

~ Adolf Eichmann (SS official), 1961

I've heard the statistics - half of all high school students are bullies, and nearly half have been victimized by bullying - but, if I am going to be honest, it's not something I've given much thought. My perception of bullying is that of the big, dumb kid stealing a little boy's lunch money, and I've never experienced that exactly. Sure, I was talked about behind my back a few times as a younger student, but it wasn't really "bullying," right? Just a normal part of childhood, and of growing up. Every day as I travel between classes, or enjoy lunch with my friends, I see those students who seem not to belong anywhere, not with anyone but themselves. But they've never truly been "bullied," I reason. If they desired friendship, they would seek it out themselves. No one is directly excluding them. I'm not directly excluding them. And so, the issue isn't mine to confront.

I was not uncomfortable with that perspective until, while studying the Holocaust, I came across the account of Melita Maschmann, who was a German living in the midst of rising anti-Semitism, which made her a witness of the aftermath of Kristallnacht ("the night of broken glass" - an infamous pogrom directed towards German Jews), that drew a reaction she would later describe: "For the space of a second I was clearly aware that something terrible had happened here. Something frighteningly brutal. But almost at once I switched over to accepting what had happened as over and done with, and avoiding critical reflection... With these or similar thoughts, I constructed for myself a justification of the pogrom. But in any case, I forced the

memory of it out of my consciousness as quickly as possible. As the years went by, I grew better and better at switching off quickly in this manner on similar occasions.” Though many years separate us, Maschmann’s response to anti-Semitism around her eerily reflected my own thoughts in regards to bullying. The quote stopped me in my tracks. I realized that I too was “avoiding critical reflection,” knowing that an honest examination would strip away the illusions that justified my comfortable way of living. While the Holocaust was being perpetrated, the majority of the global community abided under these same types of illusions. By first taking time to examine two of the major reasons behind our ignorance throughout human history of blatant injustice, we can move forward to understand the importance of the choice facing every witness to bullying – whether or not to continue the pattern of the past.

It is already apparent that we as humans are peculiar in our ability to avoid acknowledging the presence of evil. A common religious maxim cautions that the cleverest thing Satan has ever done is convince us he does not exist. It is so very comforting to live under the cheerful assumption that the world is good, that people are good, that modern civilization has defeated any bestial lurkings. Eli Wiesel writes in his classic novel Night of the feelings in his Transylvanian Jewish community prior to the German occupation: “Could he [Hitler] exterminate a population scattered throughout so many countries? So many millions! What methods could he use? And in the middle of the twentieth century!” My school is relatively upper class, and I like to believe that all the students attending are “good kids” – kind, well-raised, and progressive. I like to believe that my school is not prone to discrimination or to deliberate, outright bullying, the type that can result in physical confrontation or push teenagers to suicide. My living under this illusion would not particularly matter, except that one can only battle an enemy that is known and understood.

Sometimes, however, we avert our eyes from injustices much more purposefully. A November 1942 edition of "The Times" contained the war news on the front page, while a report confirming the death of upwards of two million Jews was placed on page ten. The United States War Department met requests to bomb the concentration camp of Auschwitz with the logic that such action would take air power away from "decisive operations elsewhere." And so, explosives were used on the factory areas near Auschwitz, but never on the gas chambers and crematoria just a few miles away. In 1943, the American State Department requested that diplomats in Switzerland discontinue the sending of reports describing mass murders of Jews to private persons in the United States. Why, after all, should the American people be troubled over circumstances they had no power to change? We were in the midst of a war, and tough choices had to be made. What else could we do? Bringing American soldiers home, and making the world safe for democracy, had to be our top priorities. Besides, wouldn't ending the Nazi regime be the most efficient way to end the Holocaust? I am faced with the same dilemma of divided interests that America faced during World War Two. The modern citizen sees a plethora of worthy causes to support, from saving the rainforest to finding a cure for muscular dystrophy. I cannot possibly fight every worthy battle. I must pick and choose, and confronting bullying may simply not be the battle I choose. Aren't there more pressing issues on a global scale – shouldn't I be worried more about starving children in Africa than about the self-esteem challenges of some American students? Paralyzed by indecision, I am prevented from taking action for *any* cause. Evil is simply overwhelming. However, that does not give me an excuse to ignore it when it is happening right in front of me, in my own school.

If I am to make the decision to confront bullying, I can learn from the mistakes of the past. The global community was, of course, scandalized by the reports of Nazi brutality towards

Jews. We denounced Germany's actions, and we expressed our deepest sympathy for the victims. Unfortunately, our policies often lagged behind our moral outrage. We were very willing to pass judgment on the direct perpetrators of the Holocaust during the course of the Nuremburg war crime trials, but find it difficult even today to admit that we are guilty ourselves of not having done more to stop them. Indeed, it is a very simple and self-satisfying matter for me to condemn bullying rather than ask why it is allowed to continue. How strangely fitting the words, years after the Holocaust, of Martin Luther King Jr., stating that "We shall have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people." In 1939, a ship carrying 930 Jewish refugees was refused entry into America, and forced to return to Europe. Today, I have the same choice America had: to "repent in this generation," and open my arms to those "longing to breathe free" (as the Statue of Liberty declares) of judgment and degradation, or to pass by as the refugees sit alone at the lunch table. Just as the United States feared repercussions from Nazi Germany for accepting Jewish refugees, I know I take a risk of damaging my own precious reputation by associating with the bullied. And just as anti-Semitism existed quite openly in the United States during World War Two, I myself would rather avoid those who are deemed by the general student body as different and not worth befriending.

Although I will inevitably fall back into old, familiar habits at times, I ultimately must choose the first option. Why? Because after transferring to the public school system from a tiny private institution in fifth grade, I came to know what it is to feel excluded, out of place, on the perimeter of the social arena. Comparatively, my experiences are not tragic, not remarkable. I suspect that most people have gone through similar situations, if they search far enough back in their past. (I myself had largely forgotten those times in my childhood). It may not have been

the stereotypical, blatant bullying of children's cartoons and tragic news stories, but it was bullying none the less. And in my case, at least, the kindness of individuals did much to raise me above the judgments of others. How can I justify contributing to the perpetuation of a culture that allows the degradation of others when that culture once victimized me? The well-known words of German theologian Martin Niemöller are brought to mind: "In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up."

Unfortunately, the modern world will never know how the outcome of the Holocaust could have been changed if Germany had experienced greater international pressure, if more individuals had sheltered Jews in their homes, or if fewer people, like Melita Mauschmann, chose to justify the injustice they were witness to. What if enough people had risen up that the Holocaust was terminated in the planning stages? A person can only dream. In the same way, how much could the bullying statistics be lowered, how many suicides could be prevented, if more students refused to let any individual exist in isolation? How much could the harsh, rigid culture of our social interactions be lessened? I did not always dare to dream. I did not always care. But studying the Holocaust has shown me the dangers of apathy in the face of evil. It has forced me to reflect on the inconsistencies of human nature that allow us to act as not-so-innocent bystanders to crimes against other humans who have been denied a niche in society. It has forced me to choose whether or not I will repeat the mistakes of the past. And although I will most certainly experience lapses, I choose to work towards the dream of greater human

responsibility for every person's welfare, no matter how different they may seem. I have asked myself the question the great Jewish scholar Rabbi Hillel once posed, and I ask all of humanity the same. "And when I am for myself only, what am I? And if not now, when?"

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