# Focus on Human Rights

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## *Victims, Perpetrators, Bystanders, Activists—Who Are They? Who Are You?*

I have just returned from leading the 1996 Holocaust and Hope Educators' Study Tour to Germany, Poland, and Israel. Although it is the fourth time I have conducted the program, I continue to be overwhelmed by images and emotions of the trip, and even more overwhelmed by the challenges of raising a generation to believe that the world can be a better place and that they can acquire the skills and commitment to make it so. By the time you read this, we will be well into another school year, implementing a curriculum that results in our students' being able to rhyme off the names and deeds of evil murderers and perpetrators of wars far more readily than the stories and names of the countless victims. Try it, and you'll see what I mean.

With our emphasis on skills and knowledge for outcomes-based learning, how often do we reflect on the factors that lead to moral behaviour—to acts of bravery, courage and altruism—rather than the more typical behaviours of following the crowd, bullying, or scapegoating others to get our way, or merely being spectators to world events, bystanders to unspeakable evil? As Yehuda Bauer once said: "After the Holocaust, we live in a world where the impossible became possible." How do we begin to understand this? Who were the victims—as people, as individuals and not just as numbers? What was it about the perpetrators that could lead them to commit such inhuman, barbaric acts? How could so many stand by in silence? What differentiated the rescuers, those few who took a stand and risked their lives to save others, from the masses who aided and abetted the murderers? Who were they? What would I have done in the same circumstances? What would I do today? What would you do? And what relevance does all of this have for our lives in Canada in the 1990s? These are the questions that haunt the educators who took this difficult trip. The answers are crucial in shaping their teaching upon their return, and are relevant to all our teaching, no matter what the subject area. Perhaps Haim Ginott, in his open letter to teachers, said it best:

> Dear Teacher,
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> I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness: Gas chambers built by learned engineers. Children poisoned by educated physicians. Infants killed by trained nurses. Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates. So I am suspicious of education. My request is: Help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more humane.
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> Haim Ginott,
> Teacher and Child, 1972

### Victims—Telling Their Story in Colour

I want to write first of the victims, because that is so rarely the case. Almost all of our historical accounts over the centuries are told from the point of view of those in power or of the conquerors, rarely of the people or the cultures that were destroyed. The same is true today. We read of victorious Crusaders, not of vanquished communities. We remember Marc Lapine, but how many of his victims, young female engineering students, can we name? We call it the Nerland Inquiry, when Carny Nerland was the white supremacist perpetrator and Leo LaChance was the aboriginal man he murdered. It is as the African proverb says: until the lions learn to speak and to write, tales of bravery and courage will only be told of the hunters.

The voices of the victims are silent. It is we who must speak up for them, to tell their stories so that the tremendous void they left is felt in our classrooms, and in the way that they would like to have been remembered—not as emaciated victims or "lambs led to the slaughter" but as human beings who lived colourful, vibrant lives and struggled valiantly to survive with dignity in whatever way possible. As Rachel Maier Korazin (1996), a noted Holocaust educator in Israel, has said:

> The only thing black and white in their lives was the photography of the era. We must put the colour back in their lives, not by showing Nazi photos of their victimization, but by teaching about the life and the culture that was lost. It is OK to visit and to dance in Poland. Jews lived in there for over 800 years; they were murdered there for only six.

Once survivors began to speak about the unspeakable, extensive research and writings indicate that many of the victims proved the human capacity to rise above their horrifying circumstances. In the concentration camps every event conspired to make the prisoner lose hold, but resistance took a variety of forms. As Viktor Frankl (1959) explains: "Hunger, humiliation, fear and deep anger at injustice are rendered tolerable by closely guarded images of beloved persons, by religion, by a grim sense of humour—and glimpses of the healing beauties of nature." But Frankl goes on to point out that these don't establish the will to live unless the victim makes larger sense out of apparently senseless suffering. Quoting Nietsche, Frankl, who was himself a survivor and near-death several times during the war, believes that "he who has a WHY to live can bear with almost any HOW." This, then, for Frankl is the central theme of existentialism: to live is to suffer; to survive is to find meaning in the suffering; if there is a purpose in life at all, there must

be a purpose in suffering and in dying. But no one can tell another what this purpose is. Each must find out for the self and must accept the responsibility that the answer prescribes.

Elie Wiesel (1990) describes exactly this phenomenon in the remarkable efforts of several victims who chronicled otherwise unbelievable events. Prompted by the taunts of SS guards that even if some survived, no one would ever believe them, victims such as Zalman Gradowski, Leib Langfuss and Yankel Wiernik wrote testimonies, diaries, chronologies of events, and the personal stories of other victims. Why? Because, according to Wiesel, just as the killer was determined to erase Jewish memory, his victims fought to maintain it. Wrote Gradowski: "The purpose of my writing is to make sure that something of the truth reaches the world and moves it to avenge our lives. This is the purpose of my life." In the final analysis, what alone remains is, as Frankl says, "the last of human freedoms—the ability to choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances."

In the face of evil—of racial hatred, rape, child abuse—or even in the face of senseless, inexplicable accidents or acts of God—one is cast in the role of victim, a powerless and helpless position over which the victim has no control. It is reported that many victims chanted the *viddui*, the prayer asking forgiveness, on their way to the gas chambers. Rape victims feel a tremendous sense of guilt and shame. Abused children apologize, beg forgiveness, convinced they are to blame for vicious beatings. But such events are *never* the fault of the victims or of innocent survivors, although overwhelming guilt and self-blame sometimes lead to suicide. The question "Why me?" becomes "Why *not* me?"—sometimes with tragic answers. There is, of course, another common reaction; that is, for the victim to become the victimizer, the abused become the abuser, the survivor become the perpetrator—leading to self-hatred and sometimes also to suicide. The cycle of victimhood cannot be broken unless there is an intervention—someone to show it is *not* the fault of the victim, someone to substitute other models of behaviour.

## Perpetrators—Ordinary People or Willing Accomplices?

There are those who try to describe the architects and perpetrators of the Holocaust as inhuman sadists who were aberrant, insane, or otherwise marginalized and unusual. Browning describes them as ordinary men, in his book about a Ukrainian police battalion who had rather mundane choices to make as to whether they would take on the railway deportation shifts and other tasks to facilitate the murder of Jews, instead of their regular policing duties. And the choices were often made for rather trivial reasons. On the other hand, Goldhagen describes them as Hitler's "willing executioners," living in a Europe ripe with anti-Semitism such that the majority of the population willingly and knowingly became accomplices to murder. The reality is that then, as now, the origin of the Holocaust—or of rape or hate crime or child abuse—is the story of the perpetrators and what was done to their psyches, not about the victims who were targets no matter what they did.

Perpetrators feel themselves to be victims, usually have low self-esteem, and are looking for someone to blame for their problems. They have often been raised in abusive, authoritarian environments. They are easily swayed by propaganda, usually foisted on them by a hatemonger who is looking to increase his own power base by promising his audience more power, opportunity and self-reliance, all the while imposing increasing discipline and control, building on their anger and alienation, and stereotyping and scapegoating others who are less powerful. Perpetrators let themselves be convinced that they are acting for the good of their own people, often believing that they are justified by religion. We should not forget that each SS officer's belt buckle bore the inscription "Gott Mit Uns," God Is With Us. We see the same pattern today in the so-called neo-Nazi movement, skinheads, Holocaust deniers, white supremacist groups, and even in the black Nation of Islam—charismatic leaders gathering adherents with religious and pseudo-religious fervour. Such hatemongers know how to manipulate a following who can be easily bullied into submission under the guise of strict discipline and who rarely think for themselves. Followers get further and further drawn in by the rhetoric until it's too late to get out, for the perpetrators inevitably use the same tactics to control their own ranks as they do to victimize others.

Are we all just ordinary people who, under the right circumstances, could become willing accomplices? Could *they* be *us* if the right "hot buttons" were pressed? Before we too readily dismiss such a notion, think for a moment of some examples of modern perpetrators—people who put a lesser value on some human lives than others. Soldiers in Somalia who dehumanized a people until murder was the punishment for alleged theft of food. Officials who decided, for whatever reason, not to test blood for HIV, resulting in the deaths of thousands of innocent patients. Politicians who stir up anger and scapegoat immigrants and people of colour to garner votes. And what about those who blame the victims of harassment or even rape; or, worse still, those who turn a blind eye? Are bystanders who might have intervened to stop such inhuman acts not themselves perpetrators?

## Bystanders—Passive Accomplices

"Bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problems—the most important and tragic problem is silence." These are the words of Rabbi Joachim Prinz who spoke just before Martin Luther King delivered his "I have a dream" speech at the March on Washington in 1963. Rabbi Prinz had been a rabbi in Berlin at the time of the Third Reich and knew all too well the tragic consequences when good people stand by and do nothing in the face of evil. It remains incomprehensible that the whole world stood by in silence, as in many cases it does today, as innocents continued to be murdered. The transcript of the Evian Conference of 1938 and the Bermuda Conference of 1943, when the nature and extent of the death factories were well documented, exposes the excuses given by the world powers—the Allies and neutral countries—and by major agencies such as the Red Cross and the Vatican for not intervening and for not taking refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe: we're drained by the war effort, poor economy, not enough room, and so on. It was the tiny Dominican Republic who agreed to take the most refugees while other doors remained closed.

It will interest readers to note that Canada refused to rescue any doomed souls, and even refused to host the conference, which was originally supposed to be held in Ottawa, lest the local community and desperate relatives might bring too much pressure to bear on our government to do something. Bystanders all.

What do you do today when a friend or colleague reveals an incident of abuse or harassment—turn a blind eye? Accuse the victim of being over-sensitive? Does your organization or department go into "cover-up" mode when a gross injustice or ethical breach is revealed? Does the "whistle-blower" get marginalized and accused of not being a team player? Do the needs of the organization get put before the needs and lives of human beings? Do we think of the minor inconvenience to ourselves and families as more important than helping a friend in dire need, or even a stranger in mortal danger? Do we let the bullies abuse others and manipulate us without standing up?. Where people are arbitrarily victimized, do we stand up or stand by? There are always choices to be made.

When you look at a map of Europe and examine the locations of all the slave labour camps, concentration camps, and death camps (as we did with Dr. Racelle Weiman at the Ghetto Fighters Holocaust Education Centre near Haifa), you are immediately struck by the fact that while the majority were in Germany, Poland, and other parts of Eastern Europe, such camps existed in almost every country occupied by the Nazis, except for two: Denmark and Bulgaria. There was not one camp in either Denmark or Bulgaria because their populations said no. They would not build such camps nor subject their own citizens to slave labour or death, regardless of their religion. Their leaders, their governments, and their people refused to give up their Jews. They stood up to the Nazis, and the Nazis backed down. And we are faced with the stark realization that it didn't have to happen. The Nazis proceeded to implement the mass murder of innocents, the "final solution," in countries where the leadership and most of the population either stood by or collaborated, where there was no active, organized resistance to the war against the Jews.

But even there, in the darkness, there were some rays of light—the rescuers, the "righteous gentiles," truly the Righteous Among the Nations, as they are called by the State of Israel—people who saved Jews for absolutely no personal gain. Who are they? Who are those who made the moral choice to take action, to become "participants" as Wiesel calls them, rather than bystanders? What makes a person become an activist, to take a stand, often at great personal risk to themselves and their families? And what can we learn from them to teach others?

## Activists, Participants, Risk-Takers—Rays of Light and Hope

Why does a person risk his or her life to save another, and what do such rescuers, true heroes, have in common? This was exactly what Oliner and Oliner (*The Altruistic Personality*, 1988) set out to discover in their exhaustive study of hundreds of righteous gentiles. Surprisingly, when asked why they risked their lives to save a Jew, most could give no specific reason. It was not that they saved friends—indeed, many rescued absolute strangers and even people they didn't like very much. They did it because it was the only human thing to do. There was no other reason. In Rabbi Joachim's words, again at the March on Washington in 1963: "Neighbour is not a geographic term, it is a moral concept."

In an effort to determine what comprises the altruistic personality, Oliner and Oliner conducted thorough interviews and personality assessments of several hundred rescuers. They found these activists had four factors in common—characteristics that speak volumes to educators about how we might teach to achieve our most important outcome, that of making our students more humane.

1) *Rescuers were and are critical thinkers.* These activists were self-determining individuals who did not have a "follow the crowd" mentality; rather, they evaluated what they heard and saw with a strong sense of independence and autonomy. So they could reject the Nazi ideology and propaganda as irrational and simply not true, and even reject the laws, rather than blindly following along. Personality tests revealed that the ego was well-developed but not self-centred or narcissistic. They were "mavericks" in other aspects of their lives as well, people who marched to their own tune.

2) *Rescuers had role models who taught right from wrong.* Rescuers were and are ordinary people from all walks of life—farmers, teachers, business people, rich, poor, parents, singles, Protestant, Catholic. And most had done nothing very dramatic or exceptional before the war. According to Oliner and Oliner, what most distinguished them were their connections with others in relationships of commitment and care, and their perception of who and what should be obeyed. Their rules and examples of conduct were learned from a parent, peer, teacher or mentor who helped them understand the way of determining right from wrong, and the importance of holding yourself accountable, regardless of what others say or do. The people I am calling activists, then, inevitably had a person who modelled for them a way of behaving differently, morally, and with a strong sense of social justice, regardless of the level of authority in the hierarchy of whoever is giving the orders to behave otherwise.

3) *Rescuers had a strong sense of self-worth.* It has often been said that if you value yourself, you can give something to others. Psychological profiles revealed that rescuers of intended victims during the war had a positive sense of self-esteem. They were much more likely than bystanders, who were also interviewed, to have had the kind of approving, non-punitive early parenting that is associated with low ethnocentrism and high democratic potential. Their parents were described as warm people and models of caring behaviours, often with empathy for the underdog. They taught that one must perceive others as individuals, not as representatives of a type or group. Rescuers generally felt good about what they had done, and reflected on the rescuing experience as one of the high points in their lives, despite the tremendous additional strain and hardship placed on themselves and their families over and above the effects of the war. Bystanders, on the other hand, stressed their own victimization during the war, compared their pain to the victims', blamed others for their situation, claimed they did not know, were angry that the people they turned away didn't appreciate their risk or offer them money or other forms of compensation, and generally described themselves as powerless in the situation.

4) *Rescuers had a sense of optimism and hope.* Almost all of the righteous gentiles interviewed by the Oliners expressed a strong sense of feeling during the war that there had to be something better, that the world could and should be a better place, and that it was possible to achieve it. Rescuers refused to see Jews as guilty or beyond hope, and refused to see themselves as helpless, despite whatever evidence there was to the contrary. They believed that even one per-

son could make a difference, and did not shrink from taking action in the direction of hope. Oliner and Oliner concluded their study as follows:

> If we persist in defining ourselves as doomed, human nature as beyond redemption, and social institutions beyond reform, then we shall create a future that will merely confirm this view. Rescuers made a choice that affirmed the value and meaningfulness of each life in the midst of a diabolical social order that denied it. Can we do otherwise?

## Who Are You? And What Do We Want Our Students To Be?

What are the lessons to be drawn from all of this? The purpose of the Holocaust and Hope Educators' Study Tour, and of my raising these issues, is not to enshrine Holocaust education as a memorial to the victims or as an anthropology or history lesson about a thousand years of European Jewish culture lost. Rather, the issues discussed here must have meaning for our own lives and the lives of our students. What do we want our students to learn? For those who understand oppression and have been hurt by prejudice, racism, sexism or exclusion, one lesson to be learned is never to allow yourself to be victimized again, and to develop skills and defense mechanisms to ensure that does not happen. But what about never allowing yourself to be the perpetrator? Victims must not become victimizers, and must learn to recognize totalitarian thinking and behaviour in themselves as well as in others. We must break the cycle of abuse and victimization, and ensure that the oppressed do not become the oppressors.

Whatever we teach about the Holocaust, we must make it very clear that there was right and there was wrong, and we must not be afraid to set clear parameters. These are not issues of relativity. I do not believe that one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. This is not a matter of point of view. The murder of innocents is wrong, no matter what the cause, no matter what political or national side you are on. What is right is the dignity of human life, and the equality and indivisibility of human life. No life is worth less than another. Racelle Weiman captured it best when she warned that we should not be Holocaust educators, but Non-Holocaust educators; that is, we must teach towards creating a world without ethnic cleansing and genocide, without hate, racism, anti-Semitism, or human rights abuses.

We must also reach the point of accepting that we can never understand what it means to be a victim—of the Holocaust, of rape, of abuse, of racism, of gay bashing—unless we were there, in that person's shoes. Who are we, then, to evaluate another's reaction? Or to argue about someone's personal interpretation of a traumatic experience? Or to judge and compare levels of grief or create a hierarchy of pain? As Rachel Maier Korazin so poignantly put it when our minds were still reeling from the images and sensations of the camps: "Say to the survivor, I will *never* understand the way you do—and, God forbid, you do not want me to. But I need to know. And we can start from here."

And so we have a starting point with our students: for learning about and helping to heal the victim and the survivor; for becoming activists, risk-takers, critical thinkers, role models; for refusing to be perpetrators of, or bystanders to, evil or abuse of any kind. We have a starting point for teaching our students how to become humane, so that they will create a world where the impossible could not be possible again.

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