

THE SPIRAL

OF **INJUSTICE**

WHEN HUMANITY DEVOLVES



Wassmuth

**CENTER FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS**

Home of the Idaho Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial

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SPIRAL OF INJUSTICE

LANGUAGE

Language
targeting "the other" through language, word choice, connotation, and imagery (name calling, ridicule, telling jokes, belittling, accepting and promoting stereotyping, etc.)

Avoidance
excluding "the other" through conscious or unconscious treatment that denies participation, limits and/or restricts access (social avoidance, scapegoating, portrayal and non-portrayal of marginalized communities)

Discrimination
denying and disadvantaging "the other" through direct and non-direct acts based on class, race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, ability, or religious preference (employment and/or educational opportunities, workplace and housing

AVOIDANCE

DISCRIMINATION

VIOLENCE

Violence
intimidating or harming "the other" through physical acts (threats, assault, desecration, stalking, harassment, arson, murder, terrorism)

ELIMINATION

Elimination
eradicating "the other" through deliberate and/or systemic destruction of life and /or liberty (CULTURAL: customs and traditions, language, music, art, history, science, political participation; BEHAVIORAL: segregation, isolation, relocation, resettlement, removal; PHYSICAL: murder, genocide)

"The Other"

an individual who is perceived by the group as not belonging, as being different in some fundamental way; often targeted because of association with a group based on class, race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, ability, or religious preference

The **Spiral of Injustice** was designed and developed by the Wassmuth Center for Human Rights in Boise, Idaho. The Center is the builder and home of the Idaho Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial.

Anne Frank and downtown Boise may seem an unlikely pairing, but the legacy Anne left for human dignity strongly resonates in Idaho.

In 1995, a traveling exhibit on Anne Frank drew in tens of thousands of visitors from across Idaho. This overwhelming interest sparked the idea for a more permanent tribute. Over the course of the next several years, a group of community leaders, human rights stalwarts, and citizens throughout the state and country worked tirelessly to bring the Memorial to life.

In 2002, their long-held vision was realized, and the Idaho Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial opened to the public. Both the triumphs and tragedies of the human story are on display, but in every quote and every idea, lies the profound power of a single voice or bold action to overcome great odds and alter the course of history.

We see how “upstanders” can interrupt the **Spiral of Injustice**.

The Spiral of Injustice

Tammy Seley Elliott

Throughout history, it has been the inaction of those who could have acted; the indifference of those who should have known better; the silence of the voice of justice when it mattered most; that has made it possible for evil to triumph.

- Haile Selassie

Most people mean well. Most people don't realize they've played a role in the propagation of injustice or could "make it possible for evil to triumph." Most people have felt the sting of injustice through language, avoidance or some other form of direct discrimination. But for "the other," it can be a lifetime burden, a barrier to access or opportunity, an avenue to violence, or at the worst, elimination. This is the reality of "the other" -- those who have been marginalized, perceived by the group as not belonging or as being different in some fundamental way because of association with a group based on class, race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, ability, or religious preference.

The Spiral of Injustice examines the devolution of humanity when "the other" is seen as apart from the norm and, therefore, not equal. If the perception of difference exists, actions to demean will exist. The downward

spiral from language to avoidance, discrimination, violence, and elimination illustrates the destruction of a core value -- “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Language is one of the most common and unwitting enablers of injustice. It is both taught and learned. My dad used racially and sexually disparaging terms when I was growing up; it was what I knew. Fortunately, as I matured, I realized the words he chose were wrong. Unfortunately, not all will challenge what has been taught. Words can be weapons, hurting and even destroying their targets. Every form of name-calling, degrading and judgmental word choices or jokes that stereotype have targets. Words are easy to say but difficult to ignore. The choice is not to be politically correct -- it is a choice to be morally correct.

Avoidance can be even easier than language. Avoidance can occur unconsciously just by crossing the street or looking away to avoid “the other.” Sometimes, even intentional actions do not seem offensive to us; maybe we just don’t include “the other” in activities or services that he or she might desire or need. Avoidance is not as passive as it may seem; it is one more card in the deck stacked against “the other.”

Discrimination takes more effort and is usually intentional. Like language, it can be learned behavior which to some makes it justifiable. Unlike language, that can be vague, discrimination is typically direct and specific behavior. Justification for discrimination is based on *the difference* -- whatever it is -- that which sets “the other” apart. These are the factors that can and do stand like dividers in our communities; they create perceptual hurdles that become actual barriers. When we discriminate against others, we devolve as humans.

Violence is defined as intimidation or harming “the other” through physical acts (threats, assault, desecration, stalking, harassment, arson, murder, terrorism). Daily, it’s on the news and in our communities. It can also lead to encampment and maltreatment of entire populations because they were deemed to be less than human. History has shown a pattern in many countries, including our own.

The full devolution of humanity is **elimination** -- genocide. It has happened and it is happening. Elimination can take place culturally to entire groups of people by forbidding or discouraging customs and traditions, language, music, art, history and the right to participate. When we isolate, relocate, resettle or remove, we have also eliminated. When we segregate a group from our society, we, in effect, eliminate them from our society.

The battle is not with or against “the other”; the battle lies within each of us to move from the sidelines of observation as a bystander and stand up and step in as upstander -- one who is willing to interrupt the **Spiral of Injustice**.

Doing or saying nothing sends a message that injustice is acceptable. It isn’t.



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The Foundation of Injustice or The Path to Safety

Sara Fry and Beau Seegmiller

Language: targeting “the other” through word choice, connotation, and imagery (name calling, ridiculing, telling jokes, belittling, accepting and promoting stereotypes, etc.)

Language is the beginning, the foundation, and an essential ingredient to any injustice. The way others are framed and labeled by the words we choose creates possibilities for action and being. Words couched in respect and acknowledgement of the dignity inherent in all humankind bring out healing and security. In contrast, words that demean or dehumanize rob people of their personhood and inherent rights as shared members of humanity. The words we choose project us and others onto a path -- whether a path that leads to safety or to one of injustice depends on our words.

Sara reflects:

I am haunted by words.

When I was in eighth grade, a second grader named Laura rode the same rural school bus I did. She was taunted mercilessly by the middle and high school students who sat toward the back of the bus. This group of boys held sway over the bus with a reign of verbal terror.

They called Laura a “guilder” -- a local slur used in our community to describe people who are poor. Laura’s family had very little money. Her father was a farmhand, and I imagine that they lived below the poverty line. Her blond hair was greasy, and she had an off-putting scent about her that suggested she bathed with less frequency than is ideal. I know this because I regularly invited her to sit beside me on the bus.

The bullying and name-calling by older students persisted, and younger children began to join in and exclude Laura. I remember one day in particular when no one would let her sit with them. I still see the terrified look in her eyes as children shook their heads “no” to her pleas. Her shoulders hunched over as she pulled back in what must have been profound feelings of shame, fear, and hurt. I remember the smile of relief and joy she flashed when I scooted over for her to join me on a plastic green school bus seat that had become a haven of relative safety.

Sadly I never stood up for her or used my words to challenge her tormentors.

I recall that the bullies seemed to be empowered by their cruelty and Laura’s response. She tried to stand up to them

once, bravely telling them to stop, that her daddy had said what they were doing was wrong. They proceeded to mock her and her father with more words that demeaned and caused pain. At times they seemed almost gleeful with the power they had to humiliate a little girl. I look back on the bus rides with Laura and recognize that the instigators were powerless youth taking power in one place where they could find it. They weren't successful academically, nor were they popular or good in sports, but they could use words to belittle and dehumanize another.

I don't know what happened to Laura; her family moved away after that school year. I can only hope that she had enough love and support in her family to overcome the impact of daily verbal abuse and develop a healthy sense of self-esteem. I also hope that her new school was filled with greater kindness and braver individuals who were willing to act as upstanders.

Language is the building block of the spiral of injustice; with it people give a voice to their thoughts of derision, hatred, and prejudice. Shane Koykaz (2013) powerfully explained that name-calling left deep wounds for those who grew up victimized by language.

We grew up believing no one would ever fall in love with us, that we'd be lonely forever, that we'd never meet someone to make us feel like the sun was something they built for us in their toolshed. So broken heartstrings bled the blues, and we tried to empty ourselves so we'd feel nothing. Don't tell me that hurts less than a broken bone, that an ingrown life

is something surgeons can cut away, that there's no way for it to metastasize; it does. (6 minutes, 24 seconds)

Words hurt, no matter how often the “sticks and stones” adage tries to convince us otherwise. We use words to create and legitimate identities. The boys at the back of the school bus called her a “guilder” and simultaneously classified her as an “other” and reduced her status within that rural community. Taken to extremes, such language signals the beginning of a journey that can end in genocide.

A little less than a decade after Laura's painful rides on a school bus, on the other side of the globe in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, one group of extremist Hutus began broadcasting language designed to demean and dehumanize the Tutsis. Africa's colonial history is a complex one, but by the middle of 1993 the Hutus were the largest ethnic group while the Tutsis made up about 9% of the population (Donohue, 2012, p. 20). The popular radio talk shows inflamed the ethnic conflict.

Near the end of 1993, these extremists began honing in on the Tutsis. They described their government as powerless to solve the problems because the moderate Hutu government attempted to work with the Tutsis. Day after day, the radio hosts vilified Tutsis by referring to them as “Inkotanyi,” a slur, and fomented mistrust and suspicion. They presented the Tutsis as connected to political killings and conspiracies. Repeatedly, broadcasters lay the blame for numerous injustices at the feet of the Tutsis. After six months, this powerful language had established the Tutsis as the dangerous criminals behind the problems, and the solution lay in their eradication (Donohue, 2012, p.p. 20-23).

On April 6, 1994, the assassination of Rwanda's president, Juvénal Habyarimana, triggered genocide. For 100 days Hutu extremists in the

armed forces and militias targeted Tutsis and moderate Hutus. They eventually killed 500,000 Rwandans (Donohue, 2012, p. 20).

The airing of these radio broadcasts did not cause the genocide alone. It had created a social space where the systematic killing was made possible and robbed “the other” of their humanity and right to exist. There are opportunities for intervention before “verbal aggression gives way to physical” (Donohue, 2012, p. 17), especially if upstanders recognize how dehumanizing language patterns serve as an “early warning system that begins to signal the beginning of a genocidal spiral” (p. 13).

Fortunately, language can also empower, uplift, and encourage. The right language can create compassionate spaces in which schoolmates, colleagues, and community members interact by intentionally using words to build trusting relationships and cultivate connection. From commitments within school and professional communities to employ positive, uplifting words to proactive efforts to move people away from dehumanizing word choice, positivity is a powerful direction. For example, Special Olympics and 200 other organizations support the Spread the Word to End the Word campaign, which asks people to stop using “retard(ed)” because it is exclusive, offensive, and degrading. The campaign “asks people to pledge to stop saying the ‘r-word’ as a starting point toward creating more accepting attitudes and communities for all people. Language affects attitudes and attitudes affect actions” (R-Word, 2016, para. 2). Replacing the “r-word” with people-first language respects the dignity of individuals with disabilities and honors their potential as contributing members of humanity.

Even when individuals have been conditioned through their life experiences to be racist and use degrading language, unfolding research about

our brains' abilities to grow and change offer hope that, over time, we can change the way we:

... think and talk about other races. [Do people pose realistic threats] just because they are different? If not, start to intentionally reframe the mental pictures you hold of them (including the terms you use to refer to them) to confirm that they are 'neutral' and not dangerous. As parents and leaders we also have the responsibility to reframe racial images and perceptions for our children and those we lead (Bosman, 2012, Reframing Is Necessary, para 2).

Language matters. Successful localized efforts encourage school children to act as upstanders in the face of bullying. National campaigns teach to replace offensive language with terms that recognize another's humanity. Interventions may be able to address divisive grievances that threaten to escalate a culture from widespread use of demeaning language on the path to genocide. Together we can make choices that allow language to create paths of safety.



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AVOIDANCE

An Algerian-American Exchange

Liza Prendergast

Avoidance: excluding “the other” through conscious or unconscious treatment that denies participation, limits and/or restricts access (social avoidance, scapegoating, portrayal and non-portrayal of marginalized communities)

*Then from being unknown
They draw closer
For his longing to live here.
He is silently disturbed.*

-Algerian author Mohammad Dib,
L.A. Trip: A Novel in Verse, Those American Things

An American in Algeria: Understanding Others

The low hanging sea mist sprayed playfully off of the Bay of Algiers as I drove along the coastal commuter road from Houari Boumediene International Airport to my hotel. The smell of roaring diesel engines and the sweet, soft flowery aroma of the soft Mediterranean afternoon floated past, only occasionally punctuated by the waft of grilled,

spiced lamb. Unlike the chaos of Cairo or Casablanca, drivers in Algiers eschewed long horn blasts, waiting patiently as the heavy traffic snaked slowly uphill through the stone buildings into the city center.

Upon entering this calm, serene, working old city for the first time, one might be lulled into a false belief that Algeria's bloody civil war no longer leaves scars. Unlike other post-war cities that bear their battle scars on the sides of buildings and otherwise modern city streets—in Sarajevo, for example, which experienced conflict in the same period in the 1990s—Algiers and its people wear the scars of conflict more privately. So upon arrival, you may be forgiven if, briefly, you wonder if this Algeria is the same place that experienced a brutal and bloody civil war twenty years ago that left an estimated 200,000 civilians dead.

Learning about Algeria's recent history makes it all the more incredible to meet the Algerians working to promote peace, civic engagement, and entrepreneurship. I worked with a remarkable young man, who I will call Youcef (not his real name). Youcef is dynamic. Young people gravitate towards him. Algerian youth look up to him for his experiential, engaging educational style—the antithesis of the didactic, lecture-based educational system that so many know. While our work together focused on the development of interactive curriculum, I tried to understand his almost magical ability to help others see a bright, peaceful future.

He was patient as we crafted interactive courses that emphasized an optimistic future rather than Algeria's troubled past. But we never discussed history, not directly.

It seems like it is just easier to avoid the truth. It is easier not to talk about it.

An Algerian in America: Understanding Yourself

A year after I visited Algeria, Youcef participated in an academic and professional exchange to the United States. I was pleased to recommend him and delighted that he would experience my country and its hospitality.

But he was not met with the warm welcome that I had received in Algeria. Instead, he encountered Islamophobia in his search for a meaningful internship—an internship that was specifically designed to promote civic engagement and social cohesion. I reached out to friends who could help him. As I wrote to them at the time, “I want to show him the best of our country—the kindness of the American spirit that I think our country should be.” We found him a placement in a welcoming, inclusive institution. But I was deeply disturbed. How often does this type of discrimination happen when someone doesn’t stand up and step in to show that it is unacceptable? How often does it happen in schoolyards and main streets and malls and coffee shops? How much of my own society have I avoided because it was too painful to recognize that it is not the tolerant democracy that I expect it to be?

It seems like it is just easier to avoid the truth. It is easier not to talk about it.

Facing a Conversation: Overcoming Avoidance

A 2014 Pew study that examined perceptions of Americans towards other religions using a so-called “feeling thermometer” found that the American public “views atheists and Muslims more coldly” than Jews, Catholics, Evangelical Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Mormons. Yet the study also showed that personal familiarity, specifically with Muslims, led to

more positive views of people of that religion. Notably, this was not the case in public perceptions of all religions studied.

To me, this finding not only demonstrates the importance of funding people-to-people exchanges—particularly between the U.S. and Muslim majority countries—but also of reflecting on our own avoidance of interacting with people of different faiths who live within our communities. This is not just a discussion of fair access to an internship or a job; legislation exists to fight discrimination in the workplace. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 “prohibits employers from discriminating against individuals because of their religious (or lack of religious belief) in hiring, firing, or any other terms and conditions of employment.” The often private stories of social discrimination -- that result in an individual being unable to access informal networks that are critical to job seeking, for example -- need to be exposed. Because it is in our social lives that we often reinforce the norms of acceptability. We cannot do so justly, however, if we avoid the hard truths just under the surface and avoid discussing them in public and private settings.

In the immortal words of Eleanor Roosevelt, “Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home -- so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”

I still fundamentally believe that the United States is a pluralistic, inclusive country -- but only if we continue to fight for it to be so. The time for avoiding conversations about religion and diversity is over.

Avoiding truth will never lead us to justice. This year, more than any other year in my lifetime, we must talk about it -- in our homes, in our work places, in our faith communities, in our civic communities.



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WHY

be an upstander?



An upstander recognizes the need for...
Empathy, Dignity, Compassion.

Normalizing Intolerance

Jason Taylor

Discrimination: denying and disadvantaging “the other” through direct and non-direct acts based on class, race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, ability, or religious preference (employment and/or educational opportunities, workplace and housing)

And I saw that what divided me from the world was not anything intrinsic to us but the actual injury done by people intent on naming us, intent on believing that what they named us matters more than anything we could ever actually do.¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates

One morning in 2014 my friend Samrat boarded a plane in New York City. Samrat is an actor and was headed to Los Angeles for a film shoot. Having not slept well the night before, he boarded the plane and plopped down in his seat, unshaven and a bit bleary-eyed, relieved to have the airport craziness behind him. Samrat closed his eyes, hoping to catch a nap before touching down in LA. A few minutes passed and he was roused by a flight attendant.

“Excuse me, sir, but we’ve had some complaints about you from other passengers.” Her tone was cordial and slightly apologetic. Samrat was confused. The flight attendant explained that other passengers thought he appeared suspicious. Samrat is an American of Indian descent who grew up in Massachusetts. He is trim, just over six feet tall, and has a dark brown skin.

“I’m afraid we have to ask that you get off the plane,” she said. Samrat was beside himself. He knew his ethnic background made him stand out, but he had never been suspected as a terrorist before.

“But I’m just sitting here,” he said. “I have to get to LA today.” Soon the captain was involved, and it became clear to Samrat that he had no choice in the matter. He gathered his things, feeling both embarrassed and angry. Before being escorted off, he scanned the silent cabin, wondering who had voiced concerns about him. No one made eye contact.

Standing on the jetway, the captain tried to smooth things over.

“Well, you know, this is New York,” he said to Samrat. “You can’t blame people for being a bit nervous after 9/11. And you’re not exactly looking your best, which doesn’t help. I’m sure you understand.”

“I’m from New York,” Samrat replied. “I’ve lived here over ten years. And the fact that I didn’t shave this morning has nothing to do with anything. So no, actually, I don’t understand.”

The plane departed as scheduled and Samrat was left behind.

In December of 1941, another young man was trying to make it to California. His name was Mike Masaoka and he was traveling by train

from Nebraska to San Francisco. At a stop in Cheyenne, Wyoming, a police officer boarded the train, took one look at Masaoka, and arrested him. Masaoka was an official from the Japanese American Citizens League and among the 1,200 Japanese-American community leaders identified as “Suspect Enemy Aliens” by the FBI in the days following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.²

Samrat and Masaoka were both victims of a discriminatory reaction to a perceived threat. In Masaoka’s case, it was the fear that Japanese-Americans living along the West Coast would become agents of the Japanese and attack US targets. Masaoka had the simple misfortune of being of Japanese descent and was arrested because of it, despite having no criminal record and being an officer for a pro-American organization. Samrat’s crime was to be mistaken for a possible terrorist based only on his appearance.

These are not isolated examples of discrimination and they should not be taken lightly. As Amnesty International notes, *[d]iscrimination is a root cause of human rights violations. By dehumanizing people it paves the way for the worst atrocities.*³ During World War II, atrocities came in the form of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066, which empowered the Army to round up some 120,000 people of Japanese descent living in Oregon, Washington, California, and Arizona and send them to concentration camps where they remained for nearly two years.⁴ No one was spared – elderly hospital patients, infants, adopted children of Caucasian

² Richard Reeves, *Infamy: The Shocking Story of the Japanese-American Internment in World War II* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015)

³ Amnesty International, *All Rights for All; Stop Discrimination*, October 1998, AI Index: ACT 31/06/98

⁴ T.A. Frail, *The Injustice of Japanese-American Internment Camps Resonates Strongly to This Day*, Smithsonian Magazine, January 2017

parents, orphans. Families could only bring what they could carry, forcing people to close their businesses and sell their belongings for a pittance.

The official story was that the government was relocating Japanese-Americans for their own protection out of fear that they would be the victims of violence by whites, but the real motive was clear enough when the Japanese-Americans arrived at the camps to find machine guns on towers pointed *into* the camps, not out.⁵ It is not hard to draw parallels between America's anti-Japanese policies of the 20th Century and the anti-Muslim undercurrents of the 21st.

Why do we discriminate? Discrimination can be thought of as the active expression of prejudice. We learn our prejudices as children observing the social interactions of our parents, family, and authority figures. We identify as part of a group and organize the rest of the world into categories of other groups. Because the complexity of the world is vast but our ability to process information is not, we tend to categorize members of outside groups, or "the other," as broad, often erroneous, oversimplifications.⁶ In this way, our prejudices can establish fundamental misunderstandings of those different from us.

Prejudice does not necessarily lead to discrimination, but it does make discrimination possible. Discrimination is also dependent on the situation and combines the attitudes and motives of the person, norms, and the consequences of behavior.⁷ Prejudices are often deeply ingrained given the human tendency to focus only on information that supports our beliefs and reject that which does not.⁸ By cherry-picking the data we believe and

⁵ Reeves, *Infamy: The Shocking Story of the Japanese-American Internment in World War II*

⁶ Irwin Katz, "Gordon Allport's 'The Nature of Prejudice,'" *Political Psychology*, Vol 12, No 1, March 1991 pp. 125-157

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Elizabeth Kolbert, "Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds," *The New Yorker*, February 17, 2017

rationalizing away any discomfort we feel when our actions conflict with our values, we legitimize discrimination.

During World War II, Americans were told that the internment was necessary in order to protect the homeland. Today, we are told that terrorist threats lurk around every corner and, “If you see something, say something.” It is a nebulous call to vigilance that in shorthand encourages us to see “the other” in the crudest, most threatening way possible. It creates a context of constant suspicion that gives way easily to discrimination.

To justify discrimination, whether it is rooted in feelings of superiority, greed, or fear, we ascribe to it some higher purpose: *Samrat and Mike Masoaka were not victims of an unjust effort to oppress others; they were the collateral damage of the noble effort to save ourselves.* This is how discrimination insinuates itself into our lives, disguised as something greater, when in fact, it’s not.

History remembers the Japanese-American internment as an appalling aberration for which the US government formally apologized in 1988.⁹ The ultimate outcome of America’s current social struggles is less clear. The controversy surrounding President Trump’s Executive Order 13769, which attempted to temporarily restrict travel to the US by citizens from seven predominantly Muslim countries, is an obvious example of this tension. Seen by some as a necessary and reasonable security precaution, it was seen by others, and ultimately the US Court of Appeals, as discriminatory and unconstitutional. The subject of numerous demonstrations, the most famous took place outside the John F. Kennedy Airport, the same airport where Samrat had been stranded three years before.

⁹ Reeves, *Infamy: The Shocking Story of the Japanese-American Internment in World War II*

It is easy to look at past examples and clearly see where things went wrong and what could have been done differently. It's not so easy to look as critically at our own lives and separate our fears from our realities. The screenwriter David Slack captured this challenge well on Twitter in his comment on the controversy:

*Remember sitting in history, thinking “If I was alive then, I would’ve...”
You’re alive now. Whatever you’re doing is what you would’ve done.¹⁰*



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WHEN

do upstanders take action?



An upstander acts when witnessing...
Inequality, Injustice, Oppression.



730-244-8806
CENTER FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS

Home of the 2014 Jane Frank Human Rights Memorial

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VIOLENCE

We are all part of a solution.

Phil Price

Violence: intimidating or harming “the other” through physical acts (threats, assault, desecration, stalking, harassment, arson, murder, terrorism)

I think that hate is a feeling that can only exist where there is no understanding. – Tennessee Williams

Every hour of every day breaking news alerts and front page headlines inform us of the most recent, senseless and horrific acts of violence. Civilians bombed in Aleppo. Churchgoers shot in Charleston. Young girls kidnapped in Nigeria. Children massacred at Sandy Hook. Every deplorable story leaves us shaking our heads in disbelief, asking the same question. Why?

Bruce Perry, an expert on children in crisis and head of the Child Trauma Academy, notes correctly that not all violence is the same. “Some violence is due to impulsive behavior, some due to the disinhibition by drugs or alcohol, some due to serious mental illness, some to hate, revenge, or retribution...[I]t is almost impossible to know exactly ‘why’ for any given act

of violence.” However, Perry continues, this complexity should not “stop us from trying to understand and prevent violence.”

My work in human rights, development and humanitarian assistance has pushed me to become more thoughtful on these issues. Over the last decade I have focused on places struggling with deep societal divisions and conflict -- South Sudan, Iraq, Yemen, Ukraine, Colombia, and Kosovo. The insight gleaned from these varied experiences leads me to believe that much of the violence in our respective societies (to include structural violence) is the product of a deep misunderstanding, mistrust and detachment from one another. As human beings we have a tendency to fear the unknown. This fear can be useful, keeping us alert in dangerous and insecure environments. It can also be corrosive, causing us to view with deep suspicion those we perceive as different in some fundamental way. Left unchecked, this poisonous thinking erodes the common bonds, values and principles that unite us. We begin to care less for the well-being of our neighbors and become locked in a vicious spiral in which our language and actions degrade, dehumanize and discriminate against “the other.” When these factors are present, violence is likely to follow.

There is, however, a bright side. Peace scholar Michael Nagler points out, “Since the days of Gandhi and King, the world has seen a dramatic upsurge in nonviolent resistance.” On a planet that seems to have gone off the rails, it is heartening to see evidence which shows Dr. King’s long moral arc of the universe bending towards justice. Upstanders should know that they are not alone in seeking a more nonviolent world. People across this country and around the globe have, and will continue to, overcome violence through right intentions and right means and stand resolute in opposition to hate. Dorothy Day, the legendary social activist said, “No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There is too much work to do.”

But where to start? With the multitude of societal ills and causes for which to fight, the first step can be a daunting one. To start a dialogue, I offer three suggestions that have proven useful in both my personal and professional life. **First, introduce active peace and mindfulness in your everyday life.** In his essay *Why Does Violence Happen?*, Dr. Perry shares how a person can be part of the solution to reduce violence in the community. In no particular order of importance, his suggestions for today's youth include:

Be intolerant of intolerance. Learn more about other religions, cultures, and worldviews. Be wary of individuals with hateful beliefs. Prevent degrading, humiliating, or bullying behaviors. Don't laugh at jokes that use hateful ideas — and certainly don't repeat them. Don't be afraid to call someone on a hateful or degrading comment about another group, religion, or culture. Be part of something. Spend time with friends. Talk, listen, laugh and be together. Along the way, identify isolated or marginalized kids — you know who they are. Reach out and include them in something. Look them in the eyes; talk to them between class; sit with them at lunch. You will be surprised at how much you both can grow up.

It's remarkable how close Perry's daily call to action mirrors the simple but powerful words found in Anne Frank's diary. "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to change the world."

Second, educate yourself. Study the histories of injustice. Learn about those who fought violence with courageous nonviolence. Familiarize yourself with their stories, their struggles and their methods. Start with the icons – Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, Betty Williams, Harvey

Milk, Ella Baker, John Lewis, Nelson Mandela, Sojourner Truth, the Dalai Lama, Fredrick Douglas and the Rev. Desmond Tutu. Next, follow the advice of acclaimed anti-racism author and educator Tim Wise – who Cornel West calls, “a vanilla brother in the tradition of John Brown” – and learn about our strong traditions of multiracial solidarity and allyship through Herbert Aptheker’s brilliant work *Anti-Racism in U.S. History: The First 200 Years*. Additionally, read Michael Nagler’s brief but poignant, *Nonviolence Handbook: A Guide for Practical Action*. This quick read deftly describes the essential guidelines that underpin successful nonviolent movements. And for good measure, read anything by the great Colman McCarthy.

Third, take action. There is no substitute for experience. Find a cause that you believe in and jump in. Be open to the new experiences, new opinions and new opportunities for growth. However, remain self-reflective. Continuously ask yourself McCarthy’s tough question, “What more should I be doing every day to bring about a peaceful and justice-based world, whether across the ocean or across the living room?”

To paraphrase Perry, “We may never understand violence, but we do know that we can help prevent it. We are not helpless. Each of us plays a role. We are all part of a solution.”

In closing, I quote from my favorite author Kurt Vonnegut. “There’s only one rule that I know of...damn it, you’ve got to be kind.”

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of any agency of the U.S. Government.



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HOW

does an upstander act?



An upstander...
Recognizes, Engages, Empowers
others to confront injustice.

When Cruelty is Left Unchecked

Mark Iverson

Elimination: eradicating “the other” through deliberate and/or systematic destruction of life and/or liberty. (CULTURAL: customs and traditions, language, art, history, science, political participation; BEHAVIORAL: segregation, isolation, relocation, resettlement, removal; PHYSICAL: murder, genocide)

Elimination, extermination, ethnic cleansing, eradication and genocide are all words representative of the same crime -- the intentional mass murder of explicitly targeted populations. The **Spiral of Injustice** illustrates how demeaning language, intentional avoidance, deliberate discrimination and violent acts can lead to the elimination of targeted populations --a tragic consequence of dehumanization. As a Peace Corps volunteer in Bulgaria and an intern with a refugee education center in Bosnia, I witnessed and researched behaviors responsible for elimination.

Zavet, Bulgaria:

The Bulgarian staff at the detention center and school where I volunteered in Zavet, Bulgaria, called the less fortunate and darker skinned children

“black dogs.” These children endured more verbal and physical abuse than the lighter skinned, who were both abusive to others and abused at the Center. All the children there were Roma, better known throughout the world by the derogatory term *gypsy*. Their parents were either dead, too impoverished to take care of them or incarcerated. During my two years as a volunteer, I quickly learned that beatings were more easily committed by staff members who dehumanized the children with demeaning language, segregated them from the others, and practiced selective discrimination.

One child’s story has remained with me.

Jordan's Story:

Jordan was 17 and extremely poor having few personal possessions. He could not afford soap, which left him visibly dirty and with a discernable odor. The older boys pushed him around, the smaller children mocked him, while the less fortunate children avoided him lest they should be beaten too. The Bulgarian staff encouraged this and frequently joined in themselves. Jordan began to run away, and the local police noticed. Usually, he was punished by being locked in a room for several days. I first noticed Jordan across from me at a ping-pong table, bombarding me with incredibly fast serves. I remarked that he played well; he was elated with the praise. I played table tennis with him and he taught me some tricks. I invited him to the movie nights I organized. It appeared his life was a little easier, but I was wrong. Jordan tried to escape again while I was supervising him and a group of children. All the children were lined up by a staff member and slapped

to gain information the children did not possess. Jordan was caught aboard a train the next day.

Thinking he was being verbally rebuked by the director, I stepped in to observe the punishment. Instead, I discovered he had been brutally beaten. Jordan was lying in a corner in his underwear, having been hit repeatedly on his hands and feet with a broom handle and beaten on his face with a phone book. He crawled and begged, “I am sorry, don’t hit me.” He was crying, drooling and bleeding. Those punishing him were verbally abusing him by calling him horrible names and telling him he was worthless. My counterpart, selected by the Peace Corp to supervise me, was the staff member responsible for the beating along with the head boy, an eighteen-year-old light skinned and more well-to-do inmate. It was clear to me how visibly set apart Jordan was.

I did nothing; I just stood looking at Jordan. I remember a haze, a lack of clarity and the numbness that washed over me. My counterpart came up to me and put his face to mine and in broken English said, “This no America, this Bulgaria.” He walked out of the room. I recall images of blood splatter on the wall, blood on my counterpart’s shirt collar, and the cigarettes, lighter and plastic coffee cup on the sink. I recall walking to my apartment down a snowy highway into a cold headwind and thinking I had just witnessed the conclusion of torture. I had done nothing. I knew I was also guilty; I was one of the silent majority. Attempting to calm myself, later in the day I went for a

walk -- and saw my counterpart in a café wearing the same jacket with blood still on his collar.

Jordan had difficulty walking the next day and yet he still attempted to play table tennis with me. I was troubled by his kind smile and it affected me deeply. I was exceptionally attentive to him over the next year as I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt. I related the incident to the Bulgarian Peace Corp staff at a seminar for newly arrived volunteers. They did not seem surprised. I spoke to a reporter and he asked me if the Center did more harm than good. I replied “yes, it creates violent offenders out of scared and discriminated youth.” While a volunteer, I began my study of ethnic hatred and violence that continued as a graduate student with the History Department at Boise State University. While in the program, I travelled to Sarajevo, Bosnia, in the summer of 2013. The genocide of Bosnia’s Muslim population during the Bosnian War was my academic focus. I visited many towns where the premeditated elimination of Bosnian Muslims had occurred.

Bosnia:

The Bosnian War lasted from April 1992 to December 1995. Economic crisis dominated the years leading up to the war, and Bosnians of all ethnic backgrounds lost their livelihoods and savings. In this desperate environment, fear mongering became a tactic that politicians, especially Bosnian Serb leadership, used to achieve and consolidate power. Extremist forms of Serbian nationalism became popular. A key component to Bosnian Serb nationalism blamed “ethnic others” for the hardships faced by the Serbian people of past and present. Many Bosnian Serbs and their Serbian neighbors defined themselves as one ethnic people living in two different nations, divided by the political border between Serbia to the east and

Bosnia in the west. The major dilemma faced by Bosnians, both Serbian Orthodox and Muslim, was that most villages, towns and cities were comprised of multiethnic populations.

In Banja Luka, a large city in northwestern Bosnia, one Muslim woman described the state of affairs preceding the war. “I couldn’t recognize Serbs I’d been friends with for years; they suddenly spoke of feeling threatened, saying we couldn’t go on living in the same communities. Some claimed Muslims should leave Banja Luka.” (Ritner and Roth, 2012, p47). In Foča, a town in eastern Bosnia, “In the months leading up to the attacks in April 1992, Muslim workers stopped receiving their salaries and were told there was no work.” (ICTY Case No. IT-96-23-T, February 22, 2001). Muslims’ freedom of movement was restricted.

Bosnian Serb President Radovan Karadzic calculated a plan, telling Bosnian Serb leadership, “one-third of Muslims will be killed, one-third will be converted to the orthodox religion and a third will leave on their own.” (ICTY Case No. IT-95-5-5/18-1, July 11, 2013). April 1992 witnessed the beginning of genocide in Bosnia in villages and towns across its northern and eastern borders. Muslim men were regularly separated from women and children, taken into the woods and executed before being dumped into mass graves. The worst genocide committed during the Bosnian War and the largest extermination in Europe since the Holocaust was perpetrated in the town of Srebrenica.

Srebrenica, Bosnia:

The Srebrenica Genocide was perpetrated by the Bosnian Serb Army and militias in July 1995, but the path to Srebrenica began years earlier, its origins based in dehumanizing language continuously spoken to foster fear and foment hatred. Biljana Plavšić, a biologist and member of


Radovan Karadzic's government, declared Bosnian Muslims "genetically tainted Serbian material who converted to Islam." (Traynor, *The Guardian*, October 27, 2009). Radovan Karadzic asserted, "Muslims can't live with others; they will overwhelm you with their birthrate and other tricks. We cannot allow that to happen." (Traynor, *The Guardian*, October 27, 2009). Ratko Mladić, the commanding general of all Bosnian Serb forces and the commander most responsible for Srebrenica and other mass killings, evoked the past saying Srebrenica was "an opportunity for the Serbs to avenge themselves on the Turks." (Traynor, *The Guardian*, October 27, 2009). This type of rhetoric permeated Bosnian radio and television. In this environment, saturated by fear of "the other," mass violence was easier to manufacture.

Eighteen years later in 2013, I was standing in Srebrenica listening to a survivor recount how United Nations Peacekeepers did very little to stop the Bosnian Serb militants from pulling families apart and dragging men away to be executed. In a rusted-out battery factory and its surroundings on the outskirts of Srebrenica where Bosnian Muslim families had huddled together seeking U.N. protection, militants separated boys over age ten from their mothers and collected them alongside grown men to be executed in large groups and dumped into mass graves. Witnesses described the well-planned nature of the elimination, describing how "the Serbs were putting men on separate buses, apart from the women and children." (Nuhanović, 2007, p.p. 428). The Srebrenica Genocide lasted from July 11 to July 22, 1995. Over the eleven-day span approximately eight thousand Bosnian men and boys were slaughtered along with more than sixty women. Bodies are still being unearthed.


The Srebrenica Genocide was rooted in hateful words delivered through countless declarations intended to stir impoverished and frightened

populations to violent action. Through a **Spiral of Injustice**, devolving from hate speech to avoidance of groups labeled as “the other” by leaders in positions of power, discrimination pervaded and elimination became possible. From his first days at the Center in Bulgaria, Jordan was labeled inferior and targeted. He was avoided by other children and segregated from activities at the Center. Jordan was brutally beaten because those responsible viewed him as an “inferior other.” Like Jordan, but to an immeasurably greater extent, the same tragic process occurred in Bosnia, leading to the Srebrenica Genocide. Before the Bosnian Muslims could be eliminated, they needed to be degraded to the status of “threatening inferiors.” The Bulgarian staff, I myself, and Bosnian Serbs all had the power of choice.

Through the process of the **Spiral of Injustice**, between language and elimination, there are decisions of right and wrong. It is always a choice to say hateful language to or about others; it is always a decision to avoid fellow human being based on their perceived differences; it is always a choice to discriminate against others to show they do not belong; it is always a choice to stand up to violence. When cruelty is left unchecked and complacency proliferates, innocents suffer and genocide becomes possible.



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Interrupt the Spiral of Injustice

Dan Prinzing

Etched into the stone of the Idaho Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial is this, from April 11, 1944, when Anne Frank penned in her diary: “One day this terrible war will be over. The time will come when we’ll be people again and not just Jews! Who has inflicted this on us? Who has set us apart from the rest? Who has put us through such suffering?”

Seventy-three years after that diary entry, the White House press secretary Sean Spicer told reporters that Hitler “didn’t even sink ... to using chemical weapons.” It was a comment ignoring that the Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of 11 million people, including six million Jews. The press secretary had forgotten that the Nazis and their collaborators had also targeted Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, socialists, trade unionists, homosexuals, people with disabilities and many others whom they considered inferior.

As the builder and home of the Memorial, the Wassmuth Center for Human Rights draws upon the quotes from Frank’s diary, as well as those

from human rights advocates throughout time, to talk with more than 10,000 K-12 students, university undergraduates and adult groups each year on docent-led tours.

Our hope is that both the voices echoing in the Memorial and the education programming of the Center become the vehicles that encourage us to share a commitment to human rights, to learn from the horrors of the past to guide our behavior and shape our attitudes in the future, and to inspire classrooms and communities throughout the state to promote respect for human dignity and diversity.

At the very moment when a national spokesperson had forgotten the horrors of history, we were hosting 3,500 middle and high school students from throughout the Boise valley at the Morrison Center for the Performing Arts, and featuring both “The Diary of Anne Frank” and “Zlata’s Diary” (the “Anne Frank of Sarajevo”) in hope that they would “never forget.”

Never forget that the **Spiral of Injustice** often begins with language — when words are used to demonize or marginalize others in the community. Never forget that injustice devolves to avoidance when “the other” is excluded through conscious or unconscious treatment that denies participation. Never forget that acts denying and disadvantaging “the other” based on class, race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, ability or religious preference is discrimination. Never forget that violence intimidates, and elimination eradicates “the other” in our community through deliberate and/or systemic destruction of life and/or liberty.

When confronted with the Nazis’ state control of the churches, Martin Niemoeller became one of the founders of the Confessional Church that

opposed Hitler's attempt to mold the Christian religion to suit Nazi ends. He stated,

In Germany they first came 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.

Niemoeller questioned at what point injustice should be challenged. If it is not your problem, should it become your problem? To what degree am I really my brother's keeper?

Eli Wiesel said, "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

When confronted with discriminatory policy, Mahatma Gandhi encouraged Indians to refuse to cooperate with the British through acts of civil disobedience. The pressure was effective, and the British eventually granted India its independence. As Gandhi counseled, "Make injustice visible."

Rosa Parks sat. Her refusal to surrender her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery, Alabama bus resulted in her arrest and spurred a 381-day citywide bus boycott led by Martin Luther King, Jr. Rosa Parks sat to confront the indignity of segregation.

They rallied. On January 21, 2017, one million women – and men – rallied in cities throughout the United States and throughout the world, to protest the misogynistic, racist actions and comments of an elected leader. They stood together to be counted in pink caps, with signs held high, in peaceful assembly.

I was among them.

I've come to believe that it is not just in the “what” to do as an upstander that matters, but also the “how” to be an upstander. Upon hearing an inappropriate joke or derogatory comment, will I **ask**, “When you said that, did you intend to be hurtful?” Will I **choose** to speak up when others are being ridiculed? Will I **teach** by serving as an example for others? Will I **A.C.T.** to interrupt the **Spiral of Injustice** when it surfaces in the classroom, school, workplace, community, state, nation and world? The emphasis is not only on the nature of the A.C.T., but rather upon the responsibility to take action.

Visiting Boise in 1997, Jacqueline Van Maarsen, a childhood friend who attended Anne’s 13th birthday party at which she received her diary as a present from her parents, planted a tree in Anne’s memory. The dedication plaque states: “Fate decreed otherwise, I would never see her again, my vivacious friend with her zest for life. May this tree symbolize the message Anne left to the world. A message directed against discrimination and prejudice.”

We teach to “never forget” so that we can also commit to “never again” by interrupting the **Spiral of Injustice**.



Dr. Dan Prinzing is the executive director of the Wassmuth Center for Human Rights. The Center's mission is to promote respect for human dignity and diversity through education and to foster individual responsibility to work for justice and peace.



Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, they send forth a tiny ripple of hope...These ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance. (Robert F. Kennedy – etched in the stone of the Idaho Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial)



Recognized as the educational arm of the Idaho Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial, the Wassmuth Center for Human Rights develops and delivers programs and resources that are designed to bring the Memorial's message into classroom and communities. Our mission is to "promote respect for human dignity and diversity through education and to foster individual responsibility to work for peace and justice."