Cohodas Literary Prize Submission- Stopping Genocide

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“I swore to never be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.” – Elie Wiesel, Nobel Prize Speech

Speaking of Genocide

The 20th century brought unparalleled human destruction in a manner that is often overlooked and underplayed in the broad discussion of world affairs, a phenomenon known today as genocide. Genocide is defined as, “the intent to destroy a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, in whole or in part, through a range of acts, such as killing, mental harm, prevention of births, and the forcible transfer of children” (Brown). Referenced by historians as the century of genocide, the years 1900 to 1999 are stained with the blood of an estimated 170 million victims of genocide, more than 4 times the number killed in 20th-century wars, according to Levinger. For an individual to truly understand genocide though, they must open their mind to the inhumanity and hatred of which the human race is truly capable. Voth enveloped the essence of human brutality in saying, “Human hatred shaped by words bear the fruit of painful actions: rape, murder, violence, and genocide. These painful actions are not inevitable and are entirely preventable” (14). It is critical to bring the conscious to an understanding that this type of evil exists in the world, and come to a global consensus on how to avoid the atrocity in the future by understanding its causes. Although endless societal forces contribute to the advent of crimes against humanity, I believe that the primary cause of genocide and dehumanization of other groups of people is a damaged line of communication. Throughout time, hatred has been fueled by words and harmful rhetoric, meanwhile, “the important pretext to systematic violence is absence of communication: silence” (Voth, 14). With these observations arrives a solution: to prevent future genocides, it is imperative to reevaluate and improve lines of global communication and break the silence.

Mass violence and genocide have a long history, with early literary references dating back to the Old Testament and an apparent call for the “destruction” of the Amalekites. Despite the well-established background of mass violence and murder, it wasn’t entitled genocide until a global act occurred that was so horrendous, it needed to be named and defined in order to criminalize it moving forward. Genocide is the term coined by Raphael Lemkin in response to the events that occurred in Nazi Germany during World War II, where the systematic and merciless killing of the Jewish population was unconscionable to the public and seemed to set a precedent for evil at the hand of humans. The Holocaust is distinct from any violence in the past, which is only exacerbated by the tendency for humans to deny that this event or ones like it could ever take place in the modern era. Personal feelings of antisemitism, nationalism, and racism have distorted our minds and allowed us to rationalize such extreme acts of violence while forgetting that violence always has an inception: hateful speech. This type of intellectual laziness and ignorance contributes to a loss of focus on the dire issue of genocide, though it should the forefront of all human rights discussions.

The circumstances of genocidal occurrences have been extensively researched to avoid the possibility of misinterpreting similar events in the future. Adolf Hitler’s charisma and nationalism consumed a nation that was desperate for guidance after World War I. Pol Pot took advantage of the global silence in Cambodia following devastating casualties from the Vietnam War in 1975. Decades of communication barriers and racism between the Belgians and Rwandans resulted in a 100-day mass killing of 75% of the Tutsi population in 1994. Although the Holocaust was one of the greatest crimes against humanity, it was not a novel event, and the world saw this form of evil both before and after it was criminalized in the world arena after World War II. World leaders subject themselves to a fragile position of power, as their words and actions are perceived by the population speculatively and under a microscope. Devout followers of a regime may interpret careless or hateful rhetoric as permission to facilitate extreme acts of violence or as an invitation to begin a supremacy movement. In any given circumstance, when the rhetoric of a small minority can influence a large support base to throw its full unquestioning support behind it, there is an obvious flaw in the transmission and receiving of ideas. Rapid transitions of power accompanied by major swings in ideology typically serve as a prelude to authoritarianism, where brainwashing is rampant, the individual voice gets quenched and vocal dissent of the regime is punishable. This environment creates the perfect condition of silence and can lead to the birth of mass violence and sweeping devastation.

Ben Voth, the author of *The Rhetoric of Genocide: Death as a Text*, wholeheartedly backs the theory that lack of communication during a conflict is a key factor for mass systematic violence. Although this seems a simplistic explanation for widespread and international genocidal events, communication consists of many aspects, such as lack of communication, communicating messages to society, political rhetoric such as persuasion and nationalism, and instances where the oppressed gain a voice. Consider the reign of one of the most notorious dictators, specifically Adolf Hitler. From his inception as the Chancellor of Germany through the height of the Holocaust and World War II, citizens who were not targeted by the Nazi party turned a blind eye and remained silent about concentration camps being built in their own neighborhoods. The following speech was delivered by Hitler in Berlin, May 1, 1935, and represents his strong use of nationalism and persuasion of the German citizen to draw a distinction between an “us” and a “them.”

Consider, my comrades, what our Germany is, and compare it with other countries. What have we? One hundred and thirty-seven people to the square kilometer; no colonies; no raw materials; no foreign exchange, no capital, no longer any foreign credits; only heavy burdens, sacrifices, taxation, and low wages. What have we, compared with the wealth of other States, the wealth of other countries, the wealth of other peoples, with the possibilities of living that they possess? What have we? One thing only; we have our people.

In order to combat these dangerously persuasive claims, one must improve his competence of language and rhetoric. “The study of rhetoric increases the ability of persons to create a message and to make sense of a message. These mutually related aspects of a communication coin can be a social cornerstone for preventing the worst of human inspired crimes, so often rooted in misunderstanding” (Voth 16). Cultural differences, language barriers, and collective experiences can all lead to a misunderstanding of the motives or actions of another group, which is why it is imperative to build a communication framework moving forward with other world leaders who can translate these goals to their people.

It is important to recognize that although communication is a fundamental factor in mass violence, other forces also lend their hand. Some of the largest humanitarian issues this generation will face stem from the growing population of humans on Earth. The rapidly increasing number of people mixed with the finite and unequally distributed goods in the world will exacerbate global tensions further, and lead to regional conflict. On the other end of the spectrum of global challenges are oppressive and selfish leaders, who become insensitive to the preciousness of human life, and the autonomy that each of these human lives possesses. Authoritarian leaders have a disturbing monopoly of power and can mobilize support from individuals who may not have been given a choice but to obey. There is something to be learned by looking at the method of killing used when mass, systematic violence outbreaks. Machetes were the weapon used during the Rwandan genocide, which is disturbing on all fronts. To inflict death is nearly impossible for most people, but under mob mentality, the Hutus showed a level of hatred so deep that reconciliation is inconceivable by murdering around 800,000 Tutsis with machetes. These inhuman ideologies are free to spread like wildfire when left unchecked by society and have done so with ease in the past, resulting in complete disregard for human life as seen with genocide.

Reading, seeing, and hearing stories of genocides can leave one cynical towards elites and the human race in general. The difficulty of becoming educated about the most salient and grim social issues is that the frequency of such events in history can leave us discouraged enough to set them aside as hopeless. Realistically, there is a reason to believe that this is true considering the plethora of evidence we have of humans behaving cruelly with no regard for life. If we submit to this conclusion though, we are exposing ourselves to a dangerous future where humans will continue to suffer, so the question of what to do about genocide and other atrocities against mankind remains. Though realistically there is only a minuscule percentage of people in the world who possess the capacity to commit mass violence, eliminating all this type of evil from the world is still an impossible task, especially without resorting to evil means in achieving this goal. The solution is difficult to find when dealing with an issue as far-reaching and systematic as genocide, which is why we must look towards what we are capable of practicing and doing every day: communicating.

“The communication approach seeks through educational techniques, to teach every individual that their voice matters and constitutes a ready bulwark against the first step towards systematic violence: silence” (Voth 17). Collective silence is a precipitating factor for mass violence, exemplified by the complete lack of response from German civilians during the Holocaust, or the international indifference towards tell-tale signs preceding and during the Rwandan genocide. I believe the first step for arriving at a society that communicates effectively is rhetorical competency and awareness of genocide, taught at an early age. Realizing that genocides are not limited to the Holocaust is a climactic and descriptive moment in one's life, because it forces him to either confront the issue head-on or resort to a life of indifference. This is an example of the clear advantage of discussing the most troublesome topics during youth rather than hearing of them for the first time after we have been fully socialized. If we socialize our children so that humanitarian issues are of utmost importance, there is no foreseeable reason we wouldn’t experience a dramatic increase in levels of tolerance and respect for others. In addition, the tools of rhetoric must be taught and reviewed continuously throughout life. Every person should be educated on speaking properly, being able to identify false arguments, clearly understanding issues that are presented, and respectfully arguing about an issue. Aristotle emphasized the importance of rhetoric and taught his pupils to employ its tools at every avenue in life, because to understand it is to possess a different type of power: knowledge. This educated society will be in a position to ask the challenging questions of its leaders, with elevated levels of scrutiny when basic human rights are at stake.

In February 2019, my family and I traveled overseas to Cambodia. Although we did not want to treat the Killing Fields in Cambodia as a tourist attraction, it was important to pay homage to the nearly 2 million victims of the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979. Although I could write a book on what I learned in Cambodia, I will focus on the guide we had that day, who interpreted and gave us a deeper understanding of the genocide. During a sobering conversation, he told us that when he and his siblings were children, they would play outside constantly and occasionally venture into one of the many mass graves near their home. One day, they picked up some bones of the genocide victims who were murdered shortly before his birth. He recalled that his grandparents saw this happen and frantically ran to them, insisting they return the bones. This resonated with me because of how incredibly difficult it must have been to tell that story, and how brave he was for telling it. There was no doubt that he was angry with the current system, and I believe it’s because he had an education where he was taught the truth of the genocide. There has been little closure or punishment following the Cambodian Genocide, and we were shocked when he told us that high-ranking members of the Khmer Rouge are still part of the government today. He further emphasized that what Cambodians want is free speech and that he and his peers love America and what it stands for: liberty and justice. Though I was sick over what I saw in Phnom Penh’s killing fields and S21 prison, our guide shared positive thoughts. He made me realize that it is possible to facilitate justice through speech, and that favorable change may come to Cambodia in our lifetimes. Just as the case is in Cambodia, the first step to a just society is identifying and talking about the past. If we allow these crimes to go unanswered in any country ever again, we may never see an end to this horrifying act.

History is painful and difficult to internalize, made further problematic by denial and downplaying of the worst examples of human nature. Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, asked the crowd at the U.S. Holocaust Museum dedication, “How could murderers do what they did an go on living?... And why was there no public outcry of indignation and outrage?” Unfortunately for all of us, genocide does not recognize color or gender; mere existence as a human being makes us vulnerable to it. On the other hand, mere existence gifts one with endless potential to make positive changes in the rhetoric of genocide. Future generations, if given the proper communication skills, can be the ones who take the final stand against genocide. After contemplating the communication approach, it is promising to consider the role that social media may play in preventing future mass violence. There is no longer a way anyone can excuse himself from fault by saying “I didn’t know”. Moving forward, our society must confront the issues that seem hauntingly familiar, and ask questions that are pertinent and proactive. Does mass incarceration in the United States manifest as a type of genocide against the African American family unit? Should we teach the truth in schools about crimes against the Native Americans? Is President Trump’s rhetoric dangerously similar to authoritarian leaders who have initiated genocide in the past? Genocide is one of the most destructive and inhuman practices the human of which the human race is capable, but a future without it is entirely possible. Humans are the sole cause of genocide and they are also the sole force that can prevent it from happening again, it all begins with ending the silence.

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