

On Remembrance

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“Wherever people feel safe, they will be indifferent... It is passivity that dulls feeling ”

- Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

“I wish to go on living even after my death .”

- Anne Frank, April 5th 1944

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Some two years ago, I received a social studies assignment, which I was to spend the following week writing;

“Discuss the treatment of Jews and other minority groups in Western Europe during the years 1933 to 1945.”

After a few days of researching and typing, with the indignant reluctance expected of any student tasked with homework, I remember being abruptly struck by a pang of guilt. It had only then come to my attention that the past half-week’s writing, an immersion in the realities of one of human history’s most heinous atrocities to date, was carried out with the detached flippancy with which one might write an essay on the industrial revolution or global weather patterns. That figure – *6 million* – had been mechanically entered and re-entered without any further thought. The atrociousness and horror of the topic, though *understood*, had so far gone unfelt.

This event, to me, confrontingly delimited the barriers between *memory* and *remembrance*. The conscience of our human society on the whole possesses an innate drive to acclimatise itself to its tragedies, in such a manner that supports the indiscriminate mental censure of their gravity and significance. With each successive generation, the terrible emotional weight and power of an exposure to humanity’s true capacity for horrors becomes inexorably numbed into a distanced ‘*historical event*’, through our ability to put the buffer of time between ourselves and the horrors. The souls of the dead slowly slip into faceless statistics as they are relegated to existing as victims of a bygone era. Most, today, *know of* the Holocaust’s tragicness, and hold it in *memory*; but seldom does one, in the course of their everyday life, pay *remembrance* to it.

The acts of ‘remembrance’ and ‘commemoration’ connote a level of activeness not fundamentally present in most of our processes of viewing history. Remembrance requires a *conscious* adjoining of our emotional faculties with those of the victims, who must be called

upon with active volition. The necessary purpose and deliberation for this is lacking in our nature; we are programmed for peace-of-mind and distance, our emotions reside in the immediate. To pay remembrance one must transcend their contextual environment, sever their passive obedience to their contemporary groundings; and our willingness to undergo this transcendence decreases the less affected we are by the direct impacts.

The predominant issue with our laissez-faire approaches to retrospection is that their passivity opens themselves up to erosion and supersession. Too easily does the idea of the Holocaust simply become 'the history essay due tomorrow night', or 'that sad Liam Neeson movie'. The more we idly absorb, the less we invoke the real humanity of the situation; the atrociousness of the Holocaust just becomes a given. Only occasionally is our emotion applied to a context wider than the screen or the page; the Holocaust is often responded to in media insofar as it immediately affects. This statement intends by no means to inveigh against Holocaust films, articles, or books, but is rather a call for them to be *actively met* by their spectators as windows to the souls behind them – not as proxies, but echoes. Commemoration and communion involve more than mere reception.

If the Holocaust becomes entrenched as a discrete historical phenomenon, purely a 'thing' to be seen, consumed, or written; it becomes doubtful. But one cannot doubt empathy. The alarming modern prevalence of Holocaust denial is born of an *allowance* for apathetic emotional detachment. Our best militation against this an insistence on the primacy and universality of life, emotion, and humanity above history; human pain as ahistorical. This insistence manifests itself in commemorative action. It represents our acknowledgement of the *people* behind it all, not dramatized, not quantified, not abstracted; it confronts them and their pain as what they are – *real*. Commemoration immortalises their *humanity*.

Toward the future, we will become even more distanced from the immediate impacts of the Holocaust, more content to obfuscate them with the barriers of statistics or fiction, more vulnerable to scepticism or denial; and commemoration will remain one of the last institutional bastions of our direct remembrance to the dead. Time stands irrelevant; the guarantor of the victims' eternality is our complete abstention from the corroding and separative notions of time and history. The implacable machine of immediacy that is modern life now exclusively *requires* commemoration to give credence to the past. Humanity, in times of remembrance, must eschew history and *feel* as a temporally unparted whole.

We are on the right track. But even commemoration is prone to numbing if it becomes rote and systematised¹. The importance therefore lies, moving forward, in isolating the processes of remembrance found in commemorative ceremonies and elevating them to *principles* to be applied in *all* interactions with the Holocaust. We unrelated and unaffected too often placate our consciences by assigning the event an inviolable sacrosanctity with which it is only necessary to truly interact once a year. At all other times the reality of the Holocaust does not exist; it simply *happened*. Its sacrosanctity automatically necessitates its acceptance, and it's

¹ For a tangential example, I might point to Joe Biden's recent remark on the September 11 Commemoration ceremony, which he describes to the press in his itinerary as "doing 9/11". Commemoration, too, can become eroded into a routine 'thing' if it is too customary.

acceptance automatically necessitates its closure. Closure was never a luxury offered to the millions killed, injured, or displaced; nor to their descendants suffering still. It is not only crucial that Holocaust commemoration remain in existence, but that we utilise its constancy to amend the plague of our indifference. Commemoration and remembrance renew our empathy – and we owe the victims our empathy precisely because they died at the mercy of a society that forgot theirs.