Evil Triumphs When Good People Do Nothing

Paul Mojzes
Rosemont College, Rosemont, PA, pmojzes@rosemont.edu

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol7/iss1/1
Elie Wiesel is undoubtedly a voice of our collective conscience. Not only is he a haunting spokesman for the past, speaking to us in lieu of the millions tortured and murdered in the Holocaust, but he is also an instigator of individual and collective concern over present and future deeds of evil. His acceptance speech of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize was vintage Wiesel: concise, disturbing, beckoning a return to humane behavior. The entire speech, which was delivered in Oslo, Norway, ought to be "required" reading, but here are some excerpts:

"I remember: It happened yesterday or eternities ago. A young Jewish boy discovered the kingdom of night. I remember his bewilderment. I remember his anguish. It all happened so fast. The ghetto. The deportation. The sealed cattle car. The fiery altar upon which the history of our people and the future of mankind were meant to be sacrificed.

I remember: He asked his father: "Can this be true? This is the 20th century, not the Middle Ages. Who would allow such crimes to be committed? How could the world remain silent?"

And now the boy is turning to ask me: "Tell me," he asks, "what have you done with my future? What have you done with your life?"

And I tell him that I have tried. That I have tried to keep the memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices.

And then I explained to him how naive we were, that the world did know and remain silent. And that is why 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.

Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must--at that moment--become the center of the universe.

There is so much injustice and suffering crying out for our attention: victims of hunger, or racism and political persecution, writers and poets, prisoners in so many lands governed by the left and by the right. Human rights are violated on every continent. More people are oppressed than free.
Yes I have faith. Faith in God and even in His creation. Without it no action would be possible. And action is the only remedy to indifference: the most insidious danger of all.

There is much to be done, there is much that can be done. One person--a Raoul Wallenberg, an Albert Schweitzer, one person of integrity--can make a difference, a difference of life and death. As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our lives will be filled with anguish and shame.

What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.

... We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them. Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately."

These are noble words. We know them to be true in a holy way. As with all prophetic words, we know them to judge our behavior, our failures to live up to our tasks. Every individual and every organization tends to fall short in its task to speak up for the voiceless oppressed. It is incumbent on us to review at appropriate times and in appropriate forums where have we overlooked instances of imploring hands and eyes, and even uttered pleas for help, which we neglected to register, convey, and helpfully respond. We must not become walking graveyards of victims' pleas. To repeat Wiesel's statement quoted above, "... if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices."

This ought to be OPREE's editorial guide light; we shall endeavor to follow it.

Paul Mojzes, editor