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Creative Writing

The Witness

Paul D. Zislis, M.D.

I want to tell you a story. Why? I don't know. Perhaps so that you will understand. Perhaps so that I will understand. It is a story of the present. It is a story that allows a little comprehension of the past. And it is a story that reveals glimpses of the future.

First this preface:

For years I have been drawn as if by a magnet to the subject of the Holocaust. I have read much about it, spoken to some who survived it, seen films on it, visited museums concerned with it. I have seen the faces of those who went through it. I have listened to their thoughts, their perceptions, and their approaches to life and existence in the face of it. I have seen their eyes. I have been drawn into their eyes, to their minds and hearts and souls. I have lived inside them, and they have lived inside me. I have been swept into the whirlwind made up of the cries, the sighs . . . the eyes of the six million.

And yet, as much and as hard as I have tried, I cannot understand it. I cannot comprehend it. It is as a vague, illusory, fleeting wind, whirling, whipping and moaning above me, which I can never really touch or see. It is as a dream, a mythology, a story which I can never really believe. Their reality is not my reality; it is only my imagination. And I stand alone, staring into their eyes, staring out from their eyes, trying to understand.

I was given my first personal introduction to the "potential" that resulted in the Holocaust several years ago. By "potential" I refer to the real potential of human beings for mass, hysteric violence. A man once said to me that the German's hatred of the Jews had nothing to do with social circumstances. He said it was a matter of genetics; that all Germans are born hating Jews, and should one be born who does not hate Jews, it is only the result of a genetic defect, a mutation.

Possibly on no other level but this irrational one can the actions of the Germans in the Holocaust be accepted or comprehended. Yet I myself was witness to what was the "potential" for the Holocaust. And it was not an inbred hatred. It was something perhaps even worse. It was an inbred love. . . .

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And now the story:

The people of the city I once lived in, Philadelphia, have a heritage of intense enthusiasm for sports, as do the people of most major cities. In recent times none of the varied sports teams had successful winning records, in fact, most had very notable losing records. The formerly abounding enthusiasm ebbed and the fans even grew depressed. Then suddenly, an ice hockey team rose to the pinnacle of its profession by winning the championship of North America, capturing what is known as the Stanley Cup. This team, called the Philadelphia Flyers, became the apple of the city's eye, or rather the city's proudly sported black eye, as they were also known as the Broad Street Bullies. Here was a team of heroic titans who bullied their way to the championship by being more violent (as well as presumably more skillful) than any other team—in a sport whose chief attraction to spectators to begin with is its violence. During the playing season, thousands of fans filled the Broad Street sports arena, while tens of thousands would follow each televised and radio carried game. Page after page of every daily newspaper's sport section was filled with the heroic conquests of the team whose battling, victorious members were immortalized in the hearts of the wildly ecstatic fans.

With the culmination of the season and the approach of the championship game for the Cup title, the joy of the fans knew no limits. Thousands of children took to the battle-like armament of the game and assumed the role of their idols in simulated playing fields, while their parents cheered them on with hearty encouragement. Upon the last game, the pulse of the city began to race. The final moments. Hearts stopped. Stomachs quivered. Tension reigned. Suddenly, the game ending buzzer screamed out and with it screamed the voices of a million fans. Victory. At long last victory. At long last a championship.

Within moments the streets throughout the city were filled with cheering fans who raised their voices, clapped their hands and stamped their feet in celebration. Automobile horns were blaring and the throngs of people began to march to the chant of "We're Number One." As if the gates of a dam had been released, a sea of people surged into the streets and flooded every major intersection in the city. I walked to the intersection nearest my home to watch the rising swell of people. Men, women and children. Young and old. All were chanting, all were screaming, all were stomping. The joy. The celebration. Those who were not on foot packed into and on top of cars. Because of what had now grown to be thousands crowding the street crossing, the cars were backed up for great distances, each one being able to pass through the crowd only at the slowest possible pace.

In a subtle fashion, the mood and behavior of the mass of people began to undergo changes. So slow and smooth were these changes that they seemed to be uncannily natural, even inevitable. Spurred on by the excitement, energy and sheer numbers of their force, they began to feel a confidence and power at their command. The team was not the victor, they were the victors. Even the most timid, formerly noncommitted observers who had come out merely to behold

the mass spectacle became caught up in the infectious dynamism that swirled around them, and they too began screaming and feeding the power which supported them.

As each car edged its way through the crowd, it was surrounded by a mass of hands which would rock it. For fun. For the celebration. Some taverns opened their doors, and in an instant their stores of beer were in the hands, then stomachs of the crowd. Even little children were to be seen running into the bars and dashing out with a bottle of beer in their hands. People began rolling their eyes and tongues and crying out in drunken laughter. Young men stripped themselves naked, ran through the crowd and danced on rooftops for all to see, loving the attention they attracted and intimidating any who did not pay them their proper respects. Firecrackers soon appeared and were exploding everywhere.

There were those who either were not aware of just who this team was and what this phantasmagoria was all about or who knew, but simply did not care. People of these categories, who were driving through the intersection and who refused to obey the command of the crowd that they honk their horns and wave their fists, or who didn't even know what was expected of them, even elderly people who were awe-struck at the bizarre vision that confronted them; all found themselves being jostled and flung about in their cars, which were being shaken almost to pieces by what was now an angry mass of hands. They stared with blank yet frightened eyes at the naked young men who climbed wild-eyed on to the car windshields and proceeded to do vile and vulgar acts of self-debasement. Beer bottles and lit firecrackers were thrown into any open window of cars containing those who refused to show their unity with the wild, drunken spirit of the endlessly cheering crowd. It was discovered that empty beer bottles, which had formerly been dropped or thrown on to the street could effectively emulate shatter-grenades when lit firecrackers were placed in them. Soon the street became a shambles of shattered glass and debris. Each explosion received roars of approval from the now swaying mob. After all, it was all in the spirit of fun. You know, the celebration.

Gradually, this raging sea of human fantasy which had madly swirled around me like a violent whirlpool began to calm and to fade away. The traffic thinned out, families and friends regrouped, lovers joined hands, and all began to quietly drift home. Their energy having been spent, they returned in great contentment. Even the really drunken ones managed to half-crawl back with the help of their friends, a last belch of laughter here and there echoing back to the now deserted scene. I sat on a street curb amid what appeared to be the ruins of a war-torn city. My heart was heavy. Tears welled in my eyes.

Concluding Remarks:

What had I witnessed? Was it really just a dream, a fantasy? Could people—everyday people, friends, and neighbors of suburbia (and of almost everywhere else in the city), adults and children who before this were only to be

seen going to work and school, or in supermarkets and shopping malls, or working in their gardens, or in parks, libraries and recreation centers—could these same people have taken part in what I had seen? Could they have even been capable of it? I tried to understand what this was, what it meant.

In itself it was nothing; no one was seriously hurt, no property was destroyed. By no means did it compare in any conceivable scope to the events of the Holocaust. But the sheer overwhelming power and violence of it. The madness of it. And the delight of the doing of it. How could it be? How was it possible for *these* people to do this?

Their counterparts, people who follow the same lifestyle, who are basically alike, except for their spoken language, are to be found in Germany today. People who, if Russia attacked, we, as their allies, would go to war to defend. Yet, how much are they really like their American peers. What is their history. What is the heritage left to the young people and children of that country. What is carried in the hearts and the minds and consciences of the still living generation of people no older than my parents. What were these common, everyday people, so similar now to their American counterparts, doing thirty-five years ago.

I still ask. I still try to understand, to comprehend, to even believe what happened in that era. Could those German people really have the capability, even the potential to do what was done, to do what they actually did?

And I continue to remember what I witnessed on my own neighborhood street corner. The capability, the “potential.” Somehow the Germans were seemingly hypnotically driven to follow their heroic leader, to follow their cause. Similarly, my American neighbors were so driven to exhibit their own potential for mass hysteric violence in the name of their own heroes. The “potential” was the same, only the directions and applications were different. In that moment that I had witnessed, in their united, hysteric, power-drunk frame of mind, I feel that that crowd, under the proper circumstances, could have been directed to destroy anything or anybody. And gladly would they have done it.

They were self-driven to that state, to that “potential,” by a want, a need, a desire to be fulfilled, to belong, to be secure and protected, to be at one with their fellow man in a purely instinctual purpose. Man is a lonely creature. His only hope for happiness in life is love. It is the answer to most of his psychological needs. It gives him his purpose in life and his reason for living.

Those people, my neighbors, were driven to their violence not by hatred, then, but by a search for a special, twisted form of love. In our own lifetime man has committed actions beyond commentary, beyond analysis, beyond words. I believe I glimpsed what still remains the “potential” of man to commit similar actions in the future, for he will always instinctually seek an end to his innate insecurity and loneliness, no matter what the method, no matter what the cost.

I see analogies, possible clues. I see “potentials,” hidden insights. I try to understand, to at least comprehend the past—the Holocaust. Still I cannot. I cannot. I am left staring out over the abyss, into the void.