

Lighting the Match Within

Erin Minuk

“First they came for the communists
And I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist
Then they came for the Jews
And I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew
Then they came for me
And there was no one left to speak out for me.”
- Martin Niemoller

By definition, a bystander is “a person who is present, but not involved.” We have all played this role in our lives. It is the safe spot between the victim and the perpetrator. However, that middle ground that so many stand on, is equal to being the perpetrator. Many believe by standing idly by, they are doing nothing wrong. This is where people become confused. What is truly wrong is the fact that they are doing nothing.

In 1964 in Queens, New York, Kitty Genovese was brutally murdered on the street just outside of her apartment. In the half hour it took for the man to stalk, and ultimately kill Kitty Genovese, thirty-eight people witnessed some aspect of the murder. However, it was not until she was already stabbed to death that someone thought to phone for help. Hearing the cries for help, seeing a neighbor being brutally attacked, you would like to think you would help. But would you have?

This is called the bystander effect. It seems that the more people present, the less likely anyone is to help a person in distress. This is because of two main factors. The first reason is Diffusion of Responsibility, in which people do not feel pressured to help out because they feel the responsibility is distributed among all those present. The second factor is the need to behave in proper and socially acceptable ways. When the

surrounding people fail to react, this can be taken as a signal that help is not needed, or an appropriate response at this time.

Many people want to change the world. Few people actually change the world. What separates those who want from those who create is courage. Courage is the power to speak up for what is morally, ethically, religiously, and emotionally right. Courage is being the change you wish to see in the world. Just a mere two syllables, could change a person, who could change a community, that could then, change the world. Simple? No one said it was, but all great things take time.

You are probably thinking to yourself, who am I? What have I been through to have the right to tell you who to be, and how to act? You are right; I am just a 16-year-old girl living in Winnipeg, Manitoba. However, I do not need to have experienced any hardships in my life to try and prevent them, and neither do you! I am trying to be the change by inspiring others to take a stand, small or big. As a Jewish people we have experienced discrimination and isolation. We have been victims, and it is our duty as the new generation to not allow this to happen again. Not just for the Jewish people, but for all people. A match is inside each and every one of us, waiting to be lit.

In April 2010 I was fortunate enough to travel to Poland as part of The March of the Living delegation. Every year, in our Judaic classes we discuss a wide variety of topics, such as God, religion, Israel, and the Holocaust. I always had a particular interest in learning about the Holocaust, so I thought March of the Living would just be another step in furthering my knowledge. How could I foretell that the trip would change my perspective on life forever?

I remember being so nervous when the itinerary read, "Tour of Auschwitz." As I stepped underneath the ARBEIT MACHT FREI steel sign, I froze. Writing this today I can't even begin to describe the feelings I had stirring inside of me at that moment. In each barrack was a different display, some of maps, belongings of the victims, like their shoes. The shoes. Up until the barrack that was set up to be a narrow hallway with glass cases on either side filled to the top with shoes, I remained composed. Shoes of all sizes and styles suffocated me as I walked through the hall. Tears were pouring out of my friend's eyes and as I hugged her, I too started to cry. With every glance I took at the shoes all I could see were the faces of the people who once wore them. Mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers screaming for help, but there was nothing I could do, I was too late. Well, that is what I thought at the time.

"I didn't think twice, it was just something that had to be done," A woman said this during our stay in Poland while being recognized as a Righteous Among the Nations one evening. As a teenager, she and her family hid 15 Jewish people in their household. Her modesty struck me. She spoke of her experience like it was done on a daily basis. I honestly could not believe my ears. I, who had been scared in my childhood to stand up to a bully, was in the presence of someone who defied the Nazi rule without a second thought. How was I worthy to be in the same room as such a courageous woman, while I sat there, a coward? It was at that moment that I realized something was missing in my life, and it was just a mere two syllables. No longer could I allow myself to feel small, no longer could I just stand by. My match was lit. I needed to stand up. My only question left, was how?

As the trip continued, my inner strength and belief continued to grow as well. It was not until I stepped foot into Majdanek that my how was answered. We stood in the open field; as we listened to our tour guide Jonathan tell the testimony of a 13-year-old girl's experience in Majdanek. As he told her story, we would be walking in the exact places she wrote about. As I walked through the gas chamber, I experienced her being separated from her mother, and watched her walk into that very building, being left completely alone. What could that girl have been thinking? How could she have felt? But I knew that no one should ever have to feel that way. No one should ever feel that alone.

I lit a candle in the crematoria of each concentration camp not just to pay my respect, but also to signify my presence and promise. During the Holocaust, the Jews lost all hope because they felt alone. My promise as a Jewish person is to never let someone feel alone, because that is allowing the first step in genocide to occur. We have a history to learn from, not to repeat. That is the message we have to get across to our generation. That we are the future, and must embrace the power we hold to create change. Individuals need to realize their significance and potential in this world. We are all able to produce change, and know better than to look to our neighbors to fill our shoes, but we have to reach inside ourselves to bring it out. We must light the match.