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Beacons of Humanity

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It is always possible to YES or NO. – Hannah Arendt

When searching for an answer to why the question of civil courage had become so important for me, I came to the event in my own life which had been decisive for me. When I was six, my mother, who had been trying for sixteen years to find out where and under what circumstances her father, who disappeared in the Second World War, had been killed and buried, took me to an address she had obtained in the town in which we spent the summer. The door to the apartment was opened by an older man who was dumbstruck when he heard mother's maiden name. Without saying a word he showed us into the living room, and he repeated mother's first and last name to his spouse who was sitting there.

The woman, after a pause during which she tried to regain her composure, burst into spasms of sobbing. The man remained silent … Mother was shaking, and I was completely confused. I don't know how long that lasted but the moment etched itself deeply in my consciousness. The woman, at one point, announced through her tears: "Yes, your father was in this apartment in 1943. My husband, who was in the underground, brought him here about eight o'clock and explained to me that he would remain here until midnight, when someone would come for him and would secretly take him out of town and lead him to the partisans. I was frightened that the fascist authorities would find him at our place. I feared for my children, my husband, and myself. After half an hour I began to weep. Your father stood up at that moment and said: 'Don't be afraid, lady. I'll leave your apartment right away. I don't want to put you in any danger.' He ignored the insistence of my husband that he not leave – that it was dangerous – because I didn't stop weeping. He went out before nine o'clock. No one came at midnight for him, because it was already known that a military patrol of the occupation had arrested him on the street … They shot him after several days of interrogation… ." The woman sobbed inconsolably, while the man sat with his head lowered. After a scream of self disgust, the woman said: "I am ashamed of the fear which cost your father his life! Forgive me if you can in any way, I cannot forgive myself."

Even today I don't know where my grandfather lays – a man whom I never knew, but because of his last noble act I know that he was a person who would recognize and honor someone else's fear. I was left with the eternal question: what would have

happened if that woman that evening had succeeded in not showing her fear?

I was born, raised, and educated in a country called Yugoslavia, in which all of its peoples were integrated. And my own family included people who were Orthodox, Catholic, Jew, and Muslim, so all of them belonged to me somehow, all of them were my own. That land broke apart during the bloody wars that had ethnic cleansing and genocide as political doctrine fourteen years ago. I saw long-lasting friendships dissolve in cosmopolitan Belgrade. I was irritated by the endless indifference, baffling insensitivity, and lack of elementary human solidarity among those blind to the fact that not very far from them people's houses were burning and people's children were being killed. I couldn't bear watching any longer from a comfortable armchair the suffering happening to my people only one hundred kilometers or less from Belgrade. I could not accept the dark images of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These images, provided by the various media, gave no ray of hope to those who wanted to preserve their compassion during such a war and to sustain their faith in people. I dipped deep in the core of horror and decided to follow the paths and footsteps of humanity.

Refusing to believe that nothing human existed in all that madness, I went to the war zones in January 1993, first as a doctor, in order to help at least one human being devoid of normal medical care because of the war. While providing care for the people of all three backgrounds, I felt their need to open their souls and talk without being questioned about their fates in the war. From their short, spontaneous confessions in the cardiology ward, I understood their need for truth, which, in places where grenades were actually falling, was surprisingly subtle and refined compared to Belgrade's and the world's much more simplistic, black and white pictures of the Bosnian war zone.

I was amazed to discover that these unhappy people generally remembered every small token of kindness somebody showed them rather than the great tribulations they had been through. They were so sensitive that they even remembered somebody's glance, full of compassion for their suffering. They used to explain to me that many didn't dare help them for fear of their lives and they always expressed a great deal of understanding for that fear. In the eyes of those who suffered most, there was practically no trace of hatred or desire for vengeance. For them there was no evil nation, only evil individuals; they knew each person's first and last name.

Horrified at the amount of evil that individuals were ready to commit, I became convinced that for years this evil would be a basic theme, and that the black cloud of their crimes would enshroud in absolute darkness all of us born in a land in whose spaces live many good and honest people about whom no one speaks. Someone had to dive down and find those pearls and string them into a necklace.

The fundamental motive that guided me in this project, even when I faltered, was the desire to reaffirm goodness as the ultimate postulate in a time of prevalent evil and spiritual and material destruction, when a human life was worth no more than a bullet. This goodness, I believe, will be the foundation for the future of all three ethnic groups in the land of my ancestors.

I believe that everyone will be held accountable for their crimes, regardless of how long such a process lasts. But will everyone be rewarded for their goodness and courage? What of those who were killed by their own compatriots while defending people of different faiths? That kind of goodness is heroism, but such heroes are anonymous. No army and government is likely to honor them. No street or square will be named after them. Their names will last only as long as the memories of those whose lives they saved, and their children. I think that the next generation must hear that such people lived and that some still live.

The good people who mustered the strength in those most terrible times to testify to the goodness of others, and all those who had courage, without asking what price they would pay for their own acts of goodness, are the most durable guarantee of the worthiness of that motive.

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