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Medicine and the Holocaust: My Personal Reflections

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Medicine and the Holocaust: My Personal Reflections

Written and Illustrated by Catherine Phamduy

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Prologue – How to Use This Book

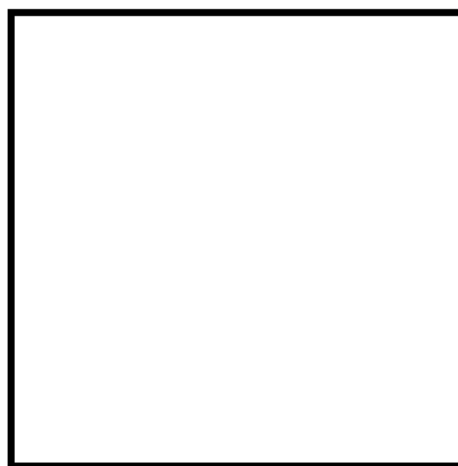
Hello! Welcome! Thank you for picking up this book and having an interest in this topic. What you are about to read is an accumulation of my reflections based on thought-provoking questions asked in my class “Medicine and the Holocaust”. You might know a lot about the Holocaust, yet here are just a few bits on my opinion from the standpoint of a medical student.

However, this is not just a book to read. I want to interact with you too, so feel free to write along the margins of the book, and there will be a few activities you can participate in with the next few chapters. The more you engage, the better! So interact, think, and have fun!

First, a little about myself. I am a medical student at the Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine. I grew up in a Vietnamese household with my parents and four other siblings in Lowell, Massachusetts. I know quite a bit about Vietnamese culture, but sadly I cannot say the same about the Jewish religion or community. Unfortunately, I do not know too much about Jewish culture and the Holocaust.

Here is what I do know. I first learned about the Holocaust in middle school when I read the Diary of Anne Frank. The conditions the Frank family had to endure always left an impression on my mind. Although I do not know people directly connected to the Holocaust, I believe it is important to be aware of the history so that we do not make the same mistakes in the future. I took this course in school hoping to learn more about the Holocaust and different cultural customs to be aware of. Knowing this, I hope to better a better physician. I wanted to know more about Jewish patients and how to better treat them. I also desired to learn about how the history of the Holocaust impacts care of these patients and how it impacts medical ethics.

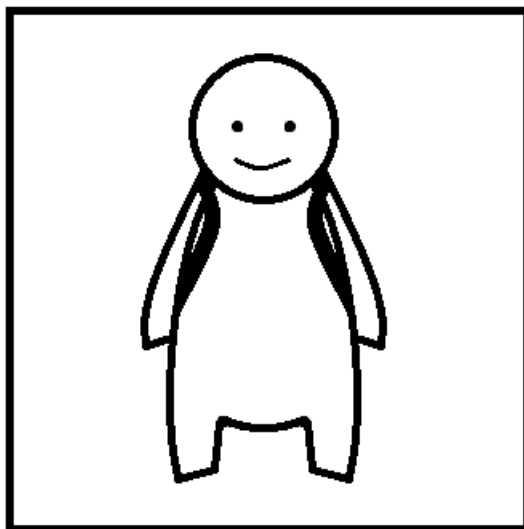
The picture you see below was what my face looked like when I first started the “Medicine and the Holocaust” course. I did not know much about the Holocaust, hence the confused face. However, I came in ready to learn and explore topics of discussion. So what do you bring to the table at this point in time? Try drawing your face below! Try expressing your emotions!

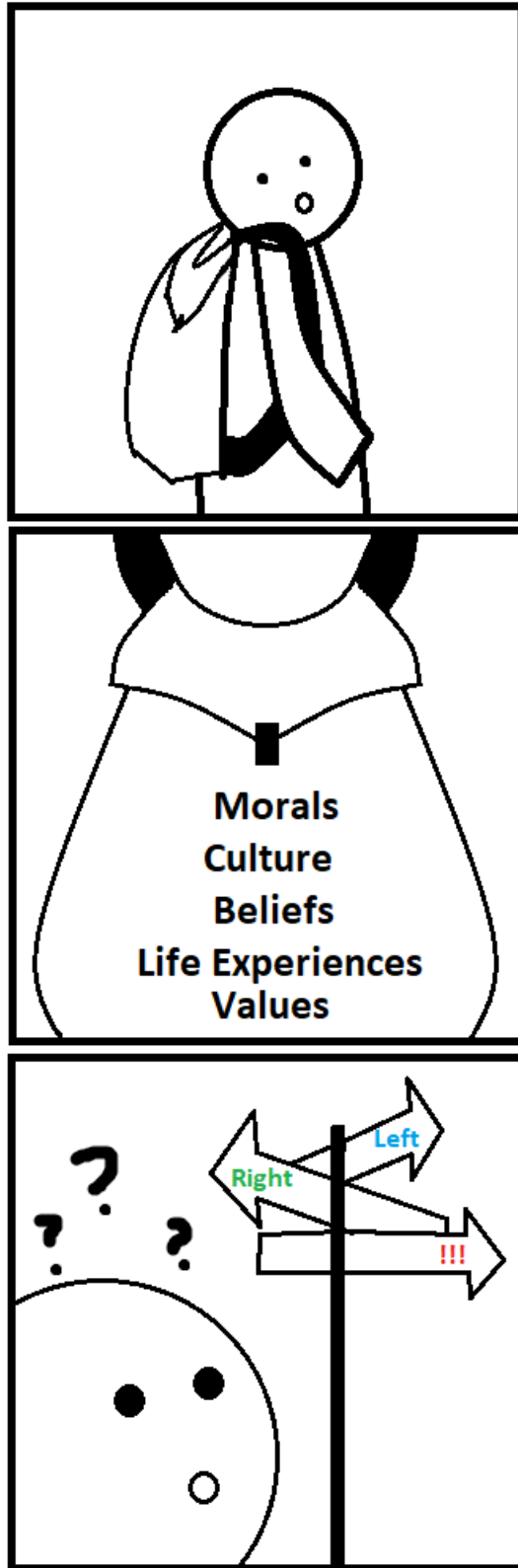


CHAPTER ONE – The Person

Let us explore the topic of what it means to be a human. Defining a person is important because it determines how we treat the people we meet in life. In the Holocaust, Jewish people were viewed as less than human. Sadly, the German population solidified these perceptions into sanctions and took action to send the Jewish community to concentration camps.

In my opinion, a person is a human being who has self-awareness, values, and morality. A person should be able to differentiate between others from him or herself. A person has their own set of values (i.e., honesty, loyalty) based on his or her life experiences. Lastly, a person can distinguish right from wrong and make decisions that align with their values. Imagine carrying a backpack. This backpack carries all your values, beliefs, morals, and life experiences. I would imagine that in any journey you go on, these are the guiding principles in which help you make decisions along the way. Whether the way you are going is right or wrong, that is up to you. At this time, I invite you to also write down your values in the blank backpack on page 6:

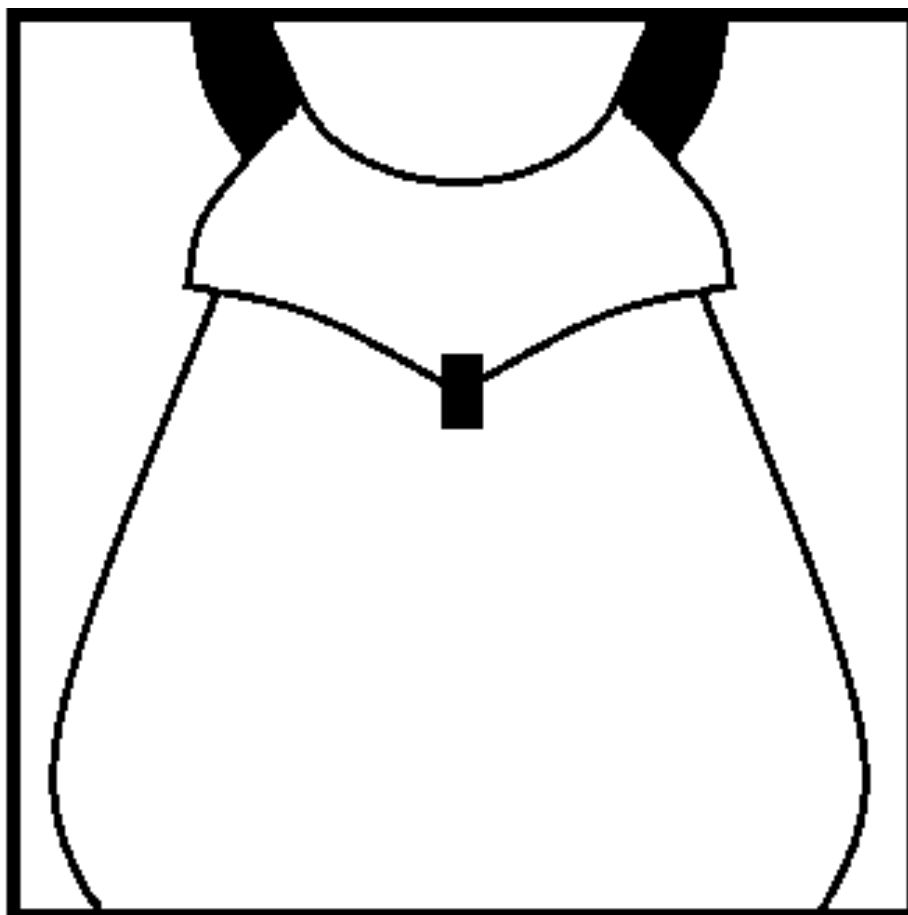




At this point, you might be wondering, what makes a person the same or different? First, people are the same/similar based on many factors. One factor is our physical features. We are biologically human with the same physical features. Another factor is more abstract and includes values, morals, culture, ideology. These factors (physical features, culture, morals) that make us all so alike could also be the same factors that make us different, much like seeing two sides of the same coin. People can also be different from one another based on their physical features, culture, moral codes, and history. I do not believe there are factors that make any person better or worse, just different from my physical features, values, morality.

No matter how different we all are from one another, there are never some people we would be better off without. I believe everyone, no matter their circumstances, have a right to life. Although there is no way of knowing how they will contribute to society, I have a belief that their potential would provide a positive impact on society. Although there are many instances in history of a person impacting the world in a negative way, I think that could partly be due to how the environment shaped them. In short, I do not think there are certain people we would be better without because everyone has the potential to impact the world in a positive way.

What is in your backpack?



CHAPTER TWO – The Moral Compass

Like the previous chapter, let us look at what determines our decisions. I like to call this determining force the moral compass. The moral compass helps us all make decisions in our life. At a young age, my moral compass was based on my Catholic background. As I grow older, I feel that my moral compass has shifted based on my experiences in life. It is also based on my values and whether a decision aligns with them or not. Here are the few things that make up my moral compass:

Honesty: I value honesty in all relationships

Empathy: I try to understand others, even if what they do conflicts with my values.

Service: It is a privilege to serve others. This not only includes the medical profession, but extends to helping others spiritually, emotionally, etc. It takes courage and vulnerability to ask for help, so when I am extending a helping hand, I respect that courage and do my best to support others.

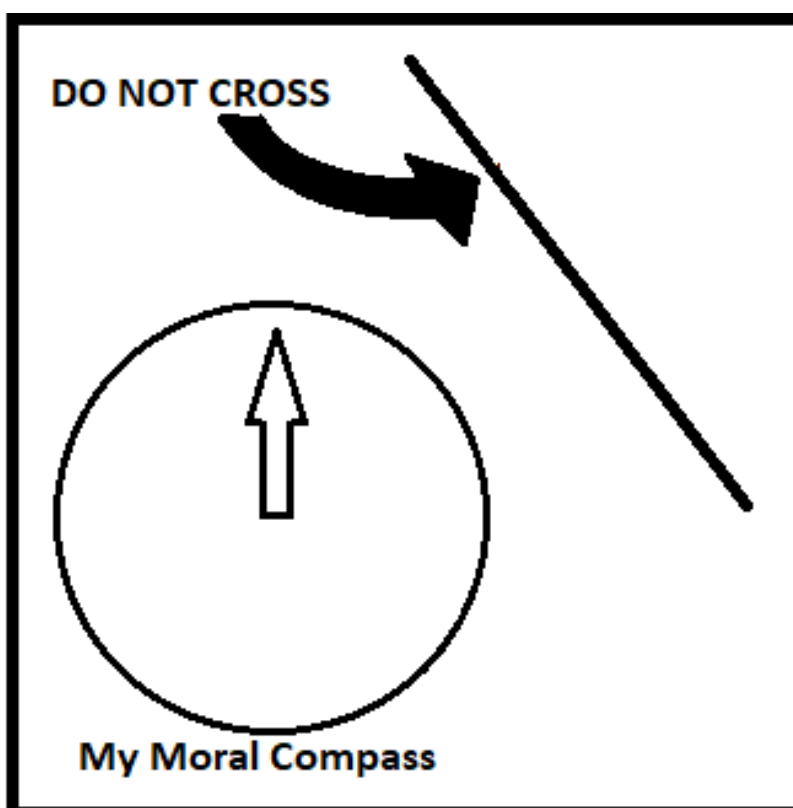
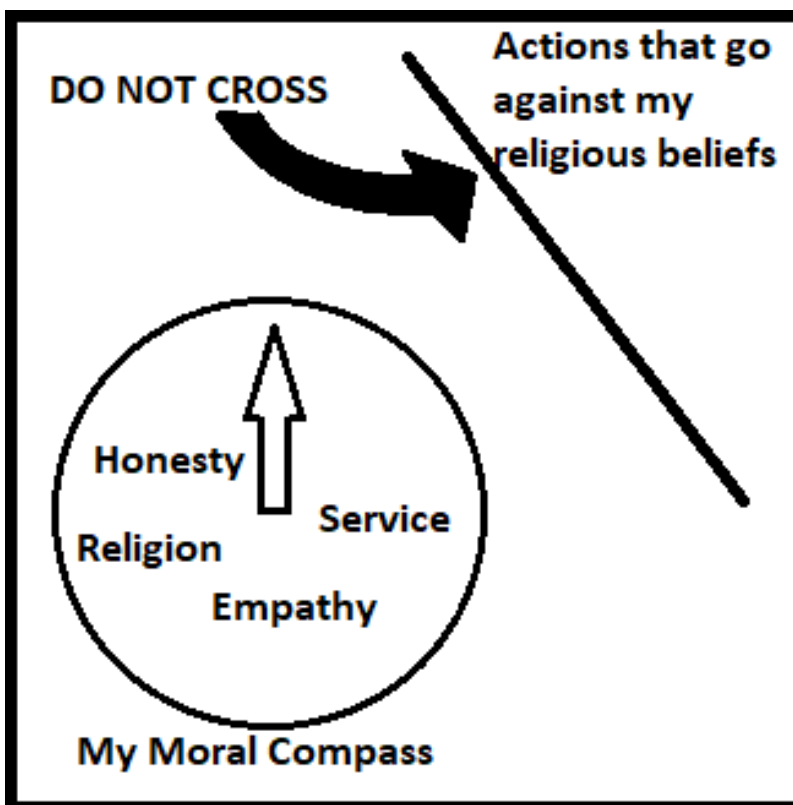
Religion: I grew up Catholic and identify with many of its core values.

Always put in my best effort: Even if I do not achieve my goals, at least I know I tried.

Try writing your moral compass. What are qualities, values, codes that are important to you?

Imagine you are looking at a pirate map trying to find treasure. You see a dotted line that shows you the way to the hidden wonders. However, along this map there are certain areas marked as dangerous! Using your compass, you successfully navigate your way to the treasure whilst dodging the dangerous spots. Much like embarking on an adventure for the treasure, your moral compass also helps you to navigate through life while avoiding the danger areas. In my life so far, those danger areas are the lines I will not cross. This extends from my Catholic background. I try to follow the Ten Commandments as closely as I can. For instance, one commandment deems to not murder another person. That is a line I absolutely will not cross. I will also not cross the line if my actions impinged on the rights of others.

In the next page, you see a visual representation of my moral compass. I invite you to also think about your moral compass and write down certain lines you will not cross. You might be surprised at what you find about yourself!

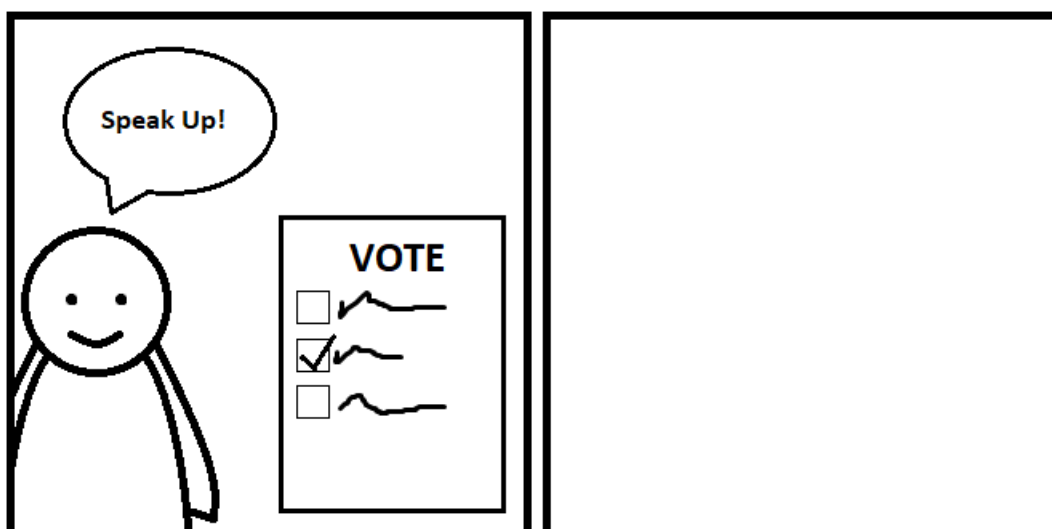


CHAPTER THREE – Anti-Semitism

I recently came across an article on anti-Semitism. The incident happened in June of 2020. One morning, an anti-Semitic, white supremacy message was spray painted on a white bed sheet that hung on the walls of the Nashville Holocaust Memorial at Gordon Jewish Community Center in Tennessee. I have linked the article at the end of this chapter. I remember thinking “Why would anyone do such a thing? This is terrible!”. After delving deeper into why these types of anti-Semitic events continue to happen, here is what I have learned.

There has been a recent surge of anti-Semitism all around the world ranging from discrimination, vandalism, Holocaust denial, and murder. There are many reasons for the recent surge, including social unrest during the COVID pandemic and sharing anti-Semitic views online. I think another reason why this is happening is due to the government’s lack of response for such events. They express their sorrow and rage when these events occur, but no tangible actions are taken. Perpetrators are not held accountable. Set with these circumstances, it is no wonder that these events have been on the rise.

Those are plausible explanations for these events, but the next important step is what people do about them. I have taken some steps. I strive to learn more about acts of anti-Semitism and to be cognizant of what Jewish patients face in today’s environment. It is also important to discuss these issues with patients and colleagues. Other ways in which I can combat anti-Semitism is by speaking up against it with the leaders in my community. I can also vote for the representatives I believe have the interest of the Jewish community in mind and will protect all minority groups under attack of anti-Semitic views or discrimination. I care about this because anti-Semitism is not just a discrimination towards the Jewish community, but a threat against liberal society. When nothing is done about these incidences, it gives others the idea that it is permissible to attack a minority group. Thus, I will not stand for anti-Semitic views or discrimination because it could happen to any minority group. What are other ways we can fight against discrimination? Try putting your ideas in the box next to mine!

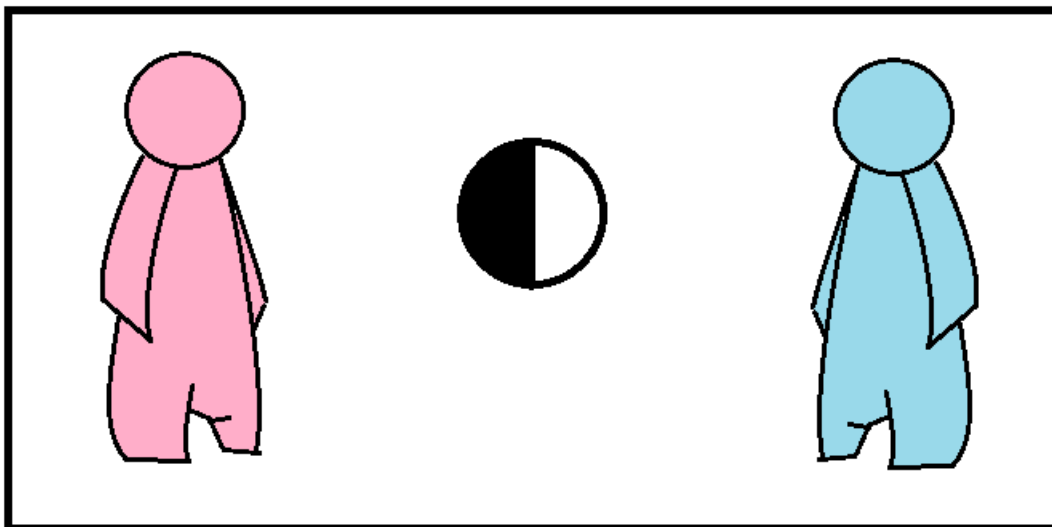


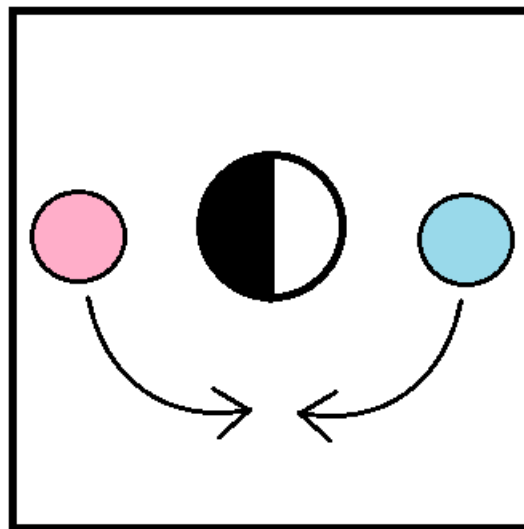
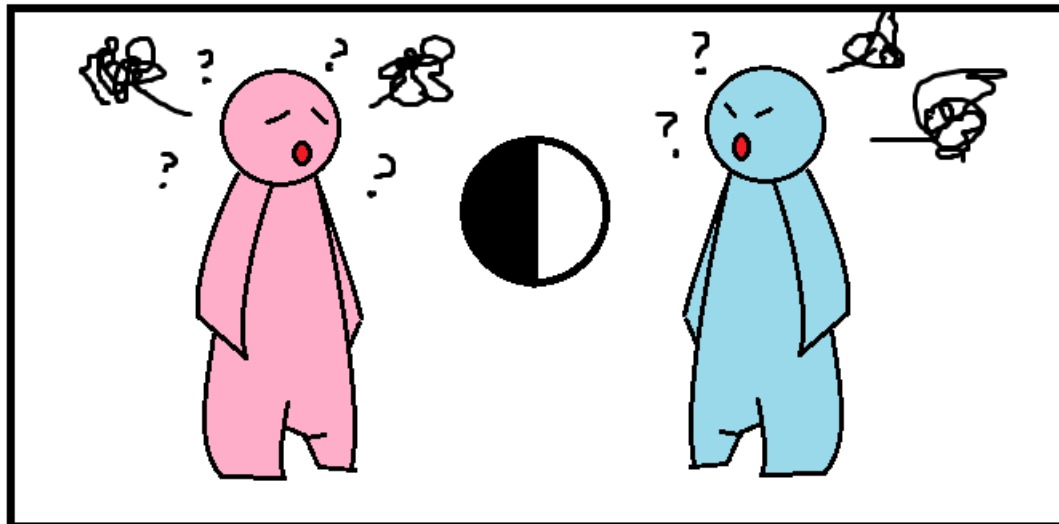
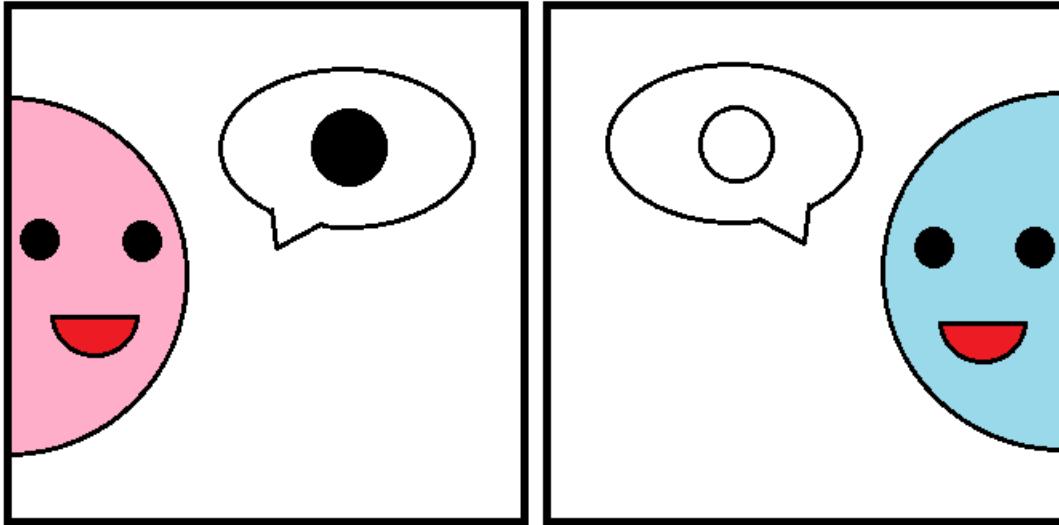
<https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/local/2020/06/15/anti-semitic-message-left-nashville-jewish-community-center/3189359001/>

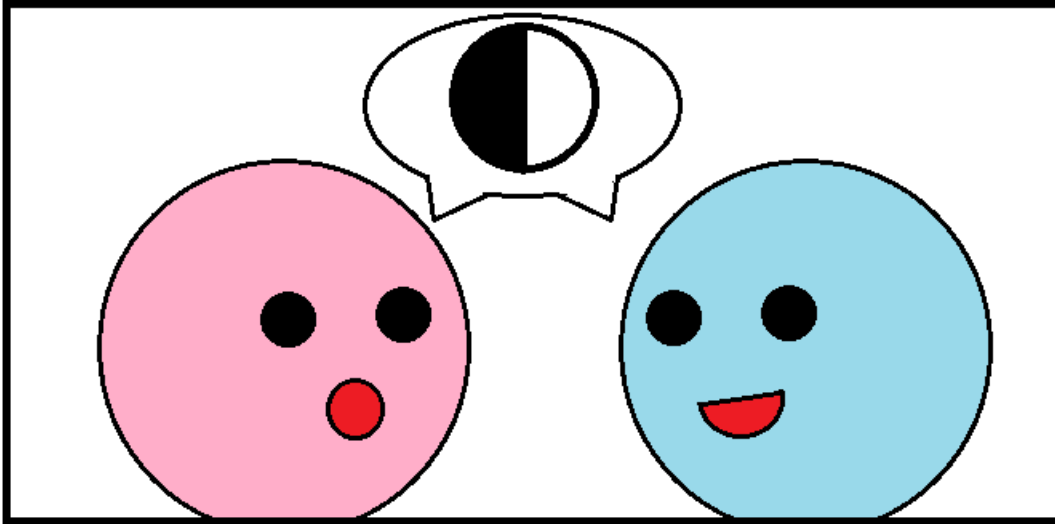
CHAPTER FOUR – The Difference Between Right and Wrong

The difference between right and wrong can be judged by its outcomes. An action is considered “right” if it brings benefits to oneself and others. You can tell if it brings benefits if the action either helps others or does not bring harm to them. The action does not impinge on the right of others. A “wrong” action is one that harms others or results in negativity or burden. Telling the difference between right and wrong depends on where the needle is pointing on one’s moral compass. I believe *choosing* between right and wrong also depends on one’s moral compass. The moral compass is based on their experiences in life and how society shapes those experiences.

The concept of right and wrong does impact the actions humanity chooses. However, in very complex situations, it can become vague. In short, it depends on the situation. If it is a simple case, such as whether it is wrong to steal an apple, then that is considered wrong. However, it is more complex if you need to steal an apple to feed yourself or others from starvation. I think that life has more complex situations than simple ones. Thus, it is difficult to say whether an action is right or wrong. For instance, war is considered a bad thing. I think that in war, soldiers fight for their country, their loved ones back at home, and especially for their fellow soldiers. Both sides view each other as the “bad guys”. However, there cannot be two bad guys, right? Neither side is completely in the wrong, but they both aren’t right either. I think it comes down to perspectives. From the opposing side’s standpoint, enemy soldiers can be viewed as bad men and women who are threatening the people of their own country. Thus, right and wrong depends heavily on the person's perspective. In these cases, I am not so sure that right and wrong make any difference in the action humanity chooses. These concepts become much vaguer. In the comic below, I tried illustrating this concept of perspective.



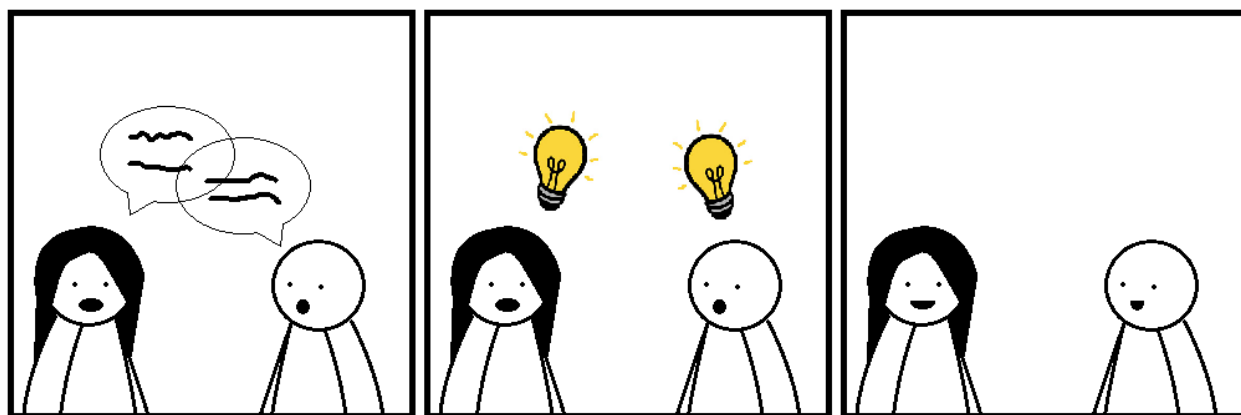




CHAPTER FIVE – Take Meaningful Action

A time when I took meaningful action was when I volunteered at the homeless shelters in Dayton, OH and did some motivation interviewing with the underserved men and women. One man sticks in my memory the most. He was struggling with establishing a permanent residence. In order to do so, he would need to also find a stable job. The work he wanted to do required he also find a permanent residence, thus was a never-ending cycle of hardships and rejection. I inquired if he had a strong support system, and he stated he did not have a family to turn to. He was distant and refused to rely on them. As an afterthought, he mentioned some friends he had in the area. Using motivational interviewing skills, I asked what it would look like if he were to stay with his friends to find a job that does not require a permanent residence. He thought about it, and at the end of the interview, he decided to rely on his friends and find a job. In doing that, he would then work on finding a permanent residence. This interaction was meaningful to me because I felt I made a difference in his life. Perhaps he had a change in mindset where he can actually rely on others, even if they were just friends. After that change in mindset, he could make solutions for himself.

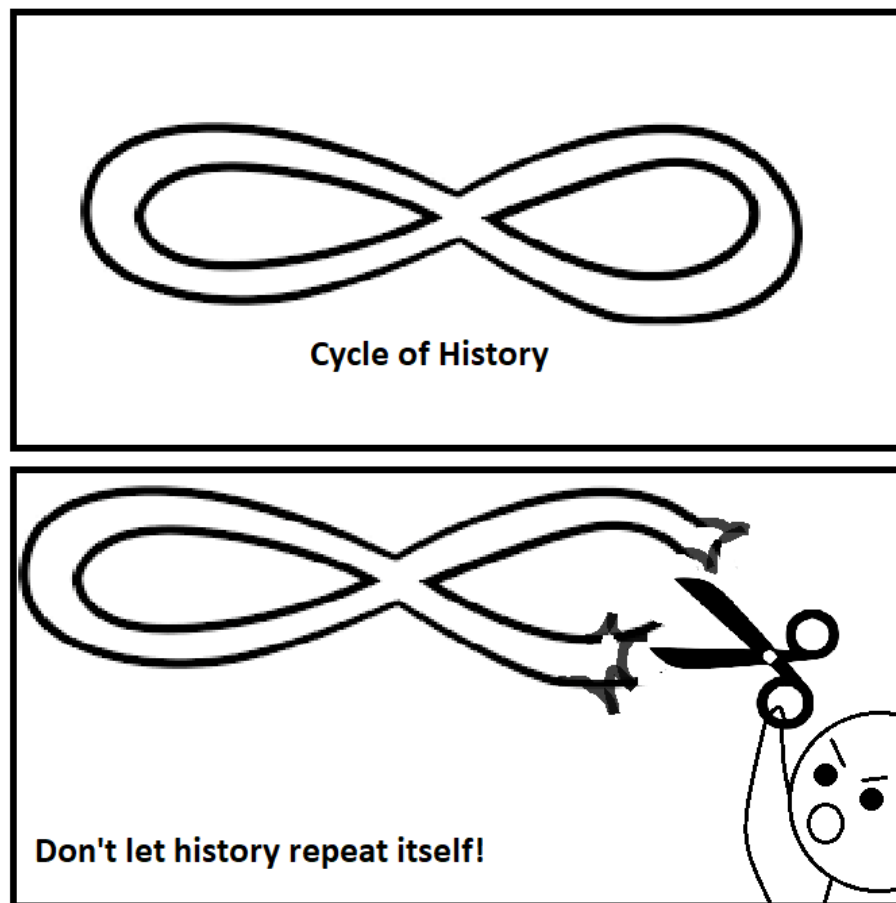
My search for meaning has a large part in why I want to do medicine. It is about establishing those connections with patients and working with them to better their health and wellbeing. I feel that as I progress through medical school and move on to residency, I will continue to have these amazing interactions with others and find my meaning in life.



CHAPTER SIX – Let Us Not Repeat History

Let us talk about how the Holocaust happened. In my opinion, the government had a large role in how the Holocaust happened. Germany at the time was ruled by a party which had strong views against minority groups. The government enabled its people to view minority groups in a certain way. This in turn seem to normalize the whole country's views about being a superior race. The governing party easily sanctioned laws creating an environment in which treating the Jewish population as inferior was normalized. They truly believed they were superior, and thus the Holocaust was justified to extinguish inferior races. Despite the several outspoken people who tried to point out that these views were wrong, those voices were drowned out by the overwhelming majority of people who believed the German race was superior. Collectively, the Holocaust happened because Germany's government enabled the discrimination against the Jewish community and other minority groups.

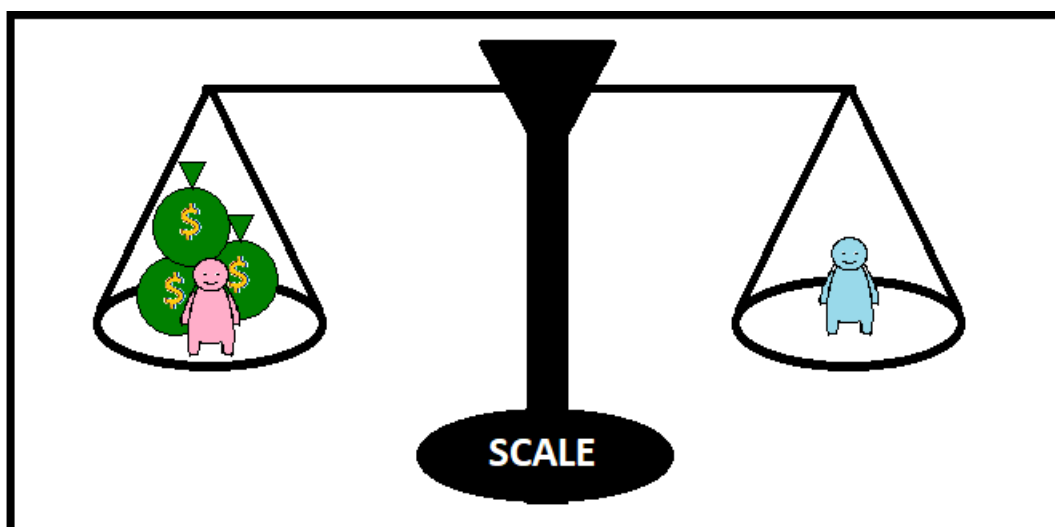
Unfortunately, history can repeat itself and the Holocaust could happen again. Even though so many children are taught about the Holocaust, anti-Semitism and racial discrimination still exists. I think it is easy to act on emotions like anger and frustration and to take it out on minority groups. And when there is an organized effort (government, institution, organization, etc.) to persecute the minority group, another version of the Holocaust could happen again.



CHAPTER SEVEN – Lives Not Worth Living

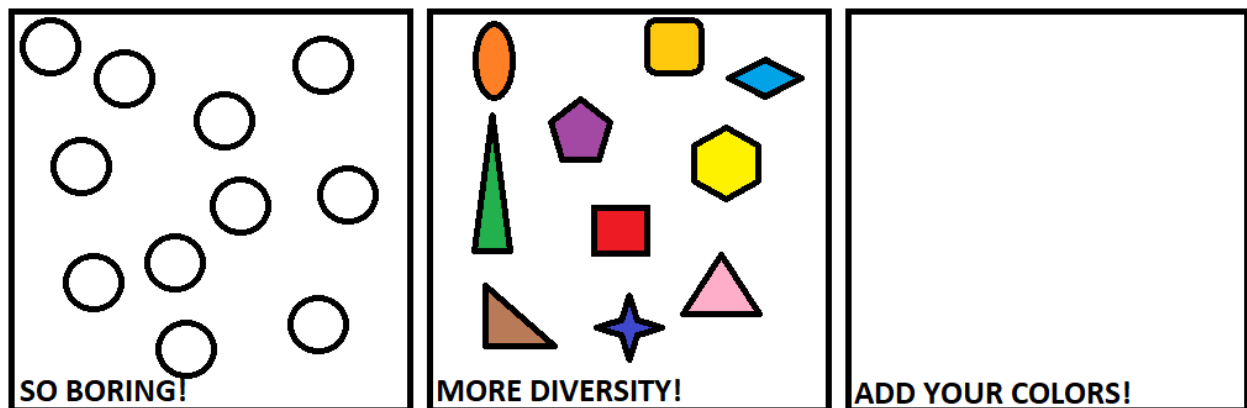
Imagine seeing an elderly man lying on his deathbed. He is immobile, gasping, and on the brink of death. It is really easy to look at this elderly gentleman's life and think "I wouldn't want to live like this!". However, would you go so far as to say that his life is not worth living? In my opinion, I am not sure if there are lives not worth living. At the end of the day, it depends on personal preference and beliefs. For one person, a life might not be worth living if it impairs them from living life to the fullest. For another, having limited functionality could be doable as long as they are with loved ones. And for others, prolonging life is the goal even if it means being placed on life-support. I believe that a person's opinions in a life worth living is based on their beliefs, experiences in life, and values. For that individual, maybe a life becomes not worth living when their life goes against their values and desires.

Along the same lines of lives not worth living, you could further question if there are some people more valuable to society than others. I don't think a life of one person is worth more than another life. Even if it comes to choosing one life over another, I do not think it depends entirely on the value of the person to society. This stems from my belief that everyone has the potential to contribute positively and greatly to society. So even if a particular individual is contributing a lot to society, that does not make him or her more valuable than another individual who has the potential to be a valuable member of society in the future. In my opinion, anyone can make the difference, so there is no one more valuable in society than others.



CHAPTER EIGHT – Differences

I believe differences such as culture, religion, customs, backgrounds should all be celebrated. Each person comes with their unique story, experiences, and values. I think that makes a society much more vibrant and interesting. If everyone were the same, it would be boring, leaving little room for advancement in culture, arts, science, math, and many aspects of society. I think America is a great place for many different people to gather and mix their cultures. However, there are many others who do not tolerate differences, which is very unfortunate. The steps I take to celebrate all differences is to first learn it from the perspective of someone who has those differences. By listening to them first, I can understand them more and understand why they do certain actions or abide by certain beliefs. By learning those differences, only then can I appreciate what they bring to the table. Listening comes first. Understanding comes second, then taking actions to celebrate those differences is the last step. Taking these steps is important because it negates ignorance and leads to understanding, not misunderstanding.



Epilogue – The Final Say

Congratulations! You have reached the end! Thank you for reading up to this point. Although we touched upon some grim and serious topics, I hope this does not leave you feeling hopeless about humanity. That was not my intention. If you have read up to this point, there is much to do for this world we live in so that we do not make the same mistakes of the past. That is one of the key lessons I took away from my “Medicine and the Holocaust” class.

Another lesson I gained from this class was speaking up, voicing my thoughts, and being less afraid of what others might think. Those monthly meetings in which everyone was encouraged to participate has influenced me to be speak up more than I normally would in any other setting. At one point, I even signed up as a discussion leader for one the Twilight episodes. It was nerve-wracking, but I am so glad I led a discussion and held a fruitful discussion with my classmates.

The last lesson I learned is one I am practicing. It is one in which I am learning in my Holocaust Humanity Project, which is an end-of-year project that focuses on what each person can do for our community. I wanted to learn more about Jewish culture and customs, so I created a presentation about Jewish games, music, and holidays. A large portion of the presentation included the music created during the Holocaust and Yom HaShoah, which is a holiday dedicated to remembering the souls from the Holocaust. I have always loved diversity in culture and traditions but creating that presentation and talking about Jewish culture with my family and friends was the first time I actively researched other cultures. In my opinion, immersing oneself and actively learning about a different culture is truly the best way to celebrate differences.

Lastly, I would like to thank the discussion facilitators and instructors Dr. Shuster and Dr. Garfunkel. “Medicine and the Holocaust” has been a wonderful and insightful class. I learned so much about the history of the Holocaust, how to speak up and get my ideas out there, respect different opinions, and held discussions. This is a fantastic class, and I will bring all the lessons I learned into my future practice as a physician. Thank you!

