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Medicine and the Holocaust Student Books

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Medicine and the Holocaust – My Journey through the Course

Lauren E. Trout

This book is meant to serve as a record of my reflections throughout the Medicine in the Holocaust course, which I took during my fourth year of medical school at Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine, from June 2020 to May 2021. These reflections are authentic, and they answer important ethical questions authentic to who I was at the time. I hope to keep these responses to show to future generations when we discuss the Holocaust and its importance in history and to each of us.

Starting the Journey

What is the Holocaust's significance to you personally, if any?

To me, the Holocaust is a significant piece of history that has impacted our country, and our world, forever. Two of my great grandfathers fought in World War II; one of them died in Belgium. I have grown up hearing stories of their lives and the beliefs that they held dear. From a very early age my parents encouraged me to read books depicting the events of the Holocaust and to meditate on the atrocities and the human failures that brought it about, in addition to the incredible responses by good people. My father is passionate about history, and he has always loved passing on his enthusiasm to his children. Last year, I attended this course's final, public event with my father, and I was reminded of all the discussions we had when I was a child.

Why are you taking the Medicine and the Holocaust course?

I am taking this course to learn more about what occurred during the Holocaust, in addition to hearing accounts from people who lived through these times, or were close to those who lived through them. I am also looking forward to discussing these events and their impact on our present and future times with my peers. In the past, any teachings I have received on the Holocaust have taken place in a lecture-listener format, which was conducive for learning but did not allow for a great amount of discussion. I would like to not only learn from instructors during this course, but also from my peers and their experiences regarding this topic.

What do you bring to the course?

I hope to bring an enthusiasm to learn to this course. This topic has always been of great interest to me, and I want to learn as much as I can in order to be an informed professional in my community and an informed member of my family. I also hope to bring a Christian viewpoint to this course. I have read books in the past about Christians harboring Jews during the Holocaust and have been struck by their incredible decision and willingness to act on behalf of their fellow man and in accordance with what was right.

What do you hope to gain and accomplish?

I hope to gain a better understanding of the events of the Holocaust so that I can pass that knowledge on to my children and my children's children. I believe that history is invaluable, and if we do not learn from history we may repeat it in the future. From this course, I hope to hear

testimonies about the events during the Holocaust and, more than just listening, participate in discussions with my peers. I hope to broaden my viewpoint through these discussions.

Per·son /'pɜrs(ə)n/
defined: (*noun*) a human being regarded as an individual

What makes people the same and different and better or worse?

This is a huge question – I think a lot goes into making a person who they are. I'm sure genetics play a role. Who a person's parents are and what they are "predisposed to do" surely go into how a person chooses to make decisions. But in another, perhaps more profound way, a person's experiences shape who they are. It is incredible how much a person's childhood goes into how they react to situations later in life. In terms of better or worse people – I honestly think that this is a choice that individuals have to make for themselves.

Are there some people we would be better off without?

While it may be easy to say that the world would be a better place without say, Hitler, I don't feel qualified to make that judgement myself. I believe that all individuals have a right to life. People can make their own decisions and the world is the way that it is because of them.

What is a person?

I believe that the difference between people and animals is the fact that we have souls. No matter someone's intellect or abilities, I believe that they have value because they have a soul.

Moral Compass

What are your ideals, core values, and convictions?

I base my ideals, core values, and convictions on the Bible. I was raised in a Christian household, and as I have grown over time and become my own person, I have developed a faith in God and His Word that I attempt to live by each day. In short, my core values can be defined by Matthew 22: 37-39 – “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” My core values – that every person has intrinsic value, that hard work is respectable, and that humans are capable of both good and bad, but should choose to do good – can be extrapolated from these commands.

Where is your moral compass set?

This question is similar to the first, in my opinion. My moral compass is set according the Biblical principals that I try to live by.

What are the lines you will not cross?

Lines I will not cross... a theoretical that would probably be easier to answer with a set of hypothetical situations. To answer in vague terms – the lines I will not cross include treating other humans with willful malice. Not in petty terms, like being rude to another person (Sadly, I’ve done that many times), but in larger issues, where it comes to valuing another person’s humanity, I refuse to treat anyone as less than human, according to my belief that every human has intrinsic value that exceeds that of any other thing.

What are the situations in which you would speak up?

I would like to think I would speak up in situations in which fellow humans were being mistreated. If I saw a person being abused by another person, I would like to think that I would do everything in my power to help. This question intrigues me though, because I am not the first (and I won’t be the last) to emphasize this sentiment; however, through the course of history, many people have been convinced to stand idly by while their fellow humans suffered. I have never understood the rationale that accompanies this decision, but I do acknowledge that the decision has been made time and time again, most likely by those who said they would speak up.

Discrimination

Find, read and share an example of contemporary anti-Semitism or discrimination of another “other”, and present your thoughts.

Please visit: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/29/us/synagogue-shooting.html>

The article above, published by the New York Times, describes the events surrounding the shooting that occurred at the Poway Synagogue outside of San Diego, California, in April 2019. A 19-year-old man entered the synagogue during a Passover service and opened fire on those inside. He killed one woman, and injured three others before fleeing the scene. The gunman in this shooting, like many others before and since, was inspired by hatred toward a group of people which he considered to be not just different from himself, but less worthy of life.

Why is it happening?

I think that anti-Semitism is happening today for the same reasons it has happened in the past. Some individuals identify a group of people that is different from themselves as either having less value or being responsible for crimes, and seek to put that group down – whether through words or through actions. The “why” behind their reasoning may never be clear. I believe that sometimes, as we saw in our film a few weeks ago, individuals may resent the success of another group of people, believing that they themselves should have inherited that success, and will take any opportunity to put that group of people down, thus elevating themselves. But as we have come to learn through life and through this course: more often, people who hate have no logic behind their hatred.

What can you do about it, and should you care to?

I definitely believe that we should not only care about acts of discrimination, but also respond to them through our justice system. Not only should we, as Americans, defend and speak out for others who are being discriminated against, but we, as future physicians, should use our platform to do so.

Right vs. Wrong

How do you tell the difference between right and wrong?

I think that all humans have a built in conscience, which guides us in many issues as to which actions are right and which actions are wrong. For instance, we all know that the horrific actions of 911 were wrong. We did not need to think about it or have it explained to us. But when we look at day to day issues, or we get into some fuzzy gray areas, we need something more to guide us. In these instances, I look to the Bible. The Bible lays out clearly defined right and wrong guidelines in the ten commandments.

Does the concept of right versus wrong make any difference in the actions humanity chooses?

Right versus wrong guides almost every action that humanity takes; however, issues arise when one man's right is another man's wrong. The most prominent villains of history did not revel in being wrong; rather, they believed they were right and acted accordingly. I think Hitler believed very strongly that his ideology was morally right. This is why truth cannot be subjective. Clearly, he committed horrible actions, that were not right in any way. He was objectively wrong. It is comforting to know that I am not in charge of defining what is right and what is wrong.

Search for Meaning

Tell us about a meaningful action that you took, or wish you had, that made a difference. How goes your “search for meaning”?

During this pandemic, in April and May, I volunteered at a food pantry in my hometown. At the time, I did not think volunteering would profoundly impact me in any significant way. I have volunteered in pantries before, and while the experiences are valuable, I don't consider them as defining moments for me. However, this time was different. During the pandemic, more people were in need of food that had never had to go to the food bank before. I met with many people that had to go through the process for the first time, and it hit me hard. People were so thankful for the food we gave them, and so generous in turning down more than their share, saying that others were in greater need. The entire experience was so humbling and so enlightening. People from my hometown, in such great need, yet still thinking of others' needs as well as their own. I felt like I actually made a difference in their lives, and my time with them provided me with a “why” during a time that was otherwise dismal. My search for meaning continues, as it always will. I am reminded regularly of why I chose medicine, and the things that keep me going. Compassion for others is something that drives me, but as I encounter many other people who are in such great need, I am reminded of why I want to be the best I can be in helping others.

How Did the Holocaust Happen?

How did the Holocaust happen?

Under Hitler's reign, Germany started to shift focus from a state in which they had just been defeated in the first World War and were in recovery mode to one in which they were leaders and developers of a new ideology. Germany was, under Hitler, entering a new regime that would be better for most Germans. In general terms, I think the Holocaust happened to the extent that it did because good people did not stand up to the wrongs they saw being committed. Many Germans were probably excited at the prospect of a better society, and did not want to speak up for fear of it going away and for fear of their lives.

Explain the "ethical" premise by which it was rationalized.

I think Hitler had Germans convinced that Jews were subverting their rise. He blamed the Jews for stealing jobs and holding prominent positions that could have gone to other Jewish citizens. The Germans bought into these lies and reacted accordingly – they did not help when their Jewish peers were oppressed, and they looked away as Jews were taken from their homes. I do not think that the majority of German citizens knew about concentration camps, but they knew that Jews were being targeted and taken away.

Could the Holocaust happen again?

I think the Holocaust could happen again. People are capable of doing wrong and have done so on a large scale many times in history. Good leaders with wrong ideas are capable of guiding entire societies to participate in their evil ideas. It seems far fetched to imagine normal citizens turning their backs on their fellow man, but I do not believe it to be impossible. Since it has happened before, I believe that it can happen again.

Value

Are there lives not worth living?

It has been my belief for some time that as long as a person is still alive, their life is worth living. This week's discussion makes me think of the reason I began my pursuit of medicine. A huge factor in my decision was due to a young man with severe Autism. Before college, I worked with him for a summer, helping him get ready in the morning – getting dressed, eating, taking medicine, etc. and then taking him to various activities in the evening. Throughout my time with him I was surprised to see that he enjoyed spending time with me bowling and hiking and reading picture books at the library. More notable, however, was how I changed as a person during my time with him. He taught me patience and compassion in ways that I could not comprehend before. His life made a huge impact on mine and changed the course of my life forever. If the answer to the over-arching question, “what makes life worth living?” is to impact other's lives for the better, his life is most definitely purposeful and worthwhile, especially considering that I was only one of many lives that he impacted. This message can be applied to many other individuals who may not meet society's guidelines for a high quality of life – the elderly, physically disabled, mentally disabled, etc. I know that many people have many different answers to this question, and see this question through a completely different lens.

Are some people more valuable to society than others?

My knee jerk response to this question is no. All lives have intrinsic value, and no one's life is more valuable than another person's. I think it is wrong to attempt to quantify a person's value; this includes comparing one person's value to another in subjective terms. Where this question gets tricky is its wording... do some people contribute to society more than others. Well... it would seem that some individuals do contribute more to society. Those individuals who volunteer their time and donate their resources and hold jobs that provide an essential service to society would seem to contribute more value than those who are perhaps self sufficient or unemployed. The important factor in this question is society. No two individuals' intrinsic value can be compared, as two lives are worth the same, in my opinion. However, when the question is framed around the contribution to society, it is hard not to identify certain individuals as more important. I think it is also important to remember that individuals who are unable to contribute their time, resources, or skills to society may be a valuable source of life lessons. Our compassion – caring for those who cannot care for themselves is a large part of what separates us from the animal kingdom. All of that to say, I don't know if some people are more valuable to society than others; but I do know that no person is more valuable than another, intrinsically.