

The Culture of Indifference

Is regular mass violence now normal in America? So normal that we are no longer shocked? So normal that we are numb?

Becoming numb to violence is a process, and we at ARTI believe it starts with thinking that whole groups of people are outside our circle of care. It begins with accepting suffering itself as inevitable and beyond our ability to change.

Too often, we numb ourselves to the millions of our fellow citizens who are homeless, hungry and living in grinding poverty by thinking they are somehow different from “the rest of us” – unfortunate, but also somehow undeserving, and responsible for their own misfortune. From there, it is a short step to thinking suffering and violence in general happen to “others”, and are therefore not our responsibility. We become indifferent.

This can be seen at the institutional, systems level, as critical support for health care, housing and education are consistently and systematically underfunded, while our prisons fill with refugees and our streets fill with people who have no place to call home.

In 1958 Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in [Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story](#):

It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, "Wait on time."

Holocaust survivor, teacher, activist and Nobel laureate [Elie Wiesel](#) spoke of the “[Perils of Indifference](#)” in a 1999 White House address:

...for the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbor are of no consequence. And, therefore, their lives are meaningless. Their hidden or even visible anguish is of no interest. Indifference reduces the Other to an abstraction”.

Our collective failure to be shocked and outraged by suffering and violence has a name. It is described by the criminal legal category called [Depraved Indifference](#) :

To constitute depraved indifference, the defendant's conduct must be so wanton, so deficient in a moral sense of concern, so lacking in regard for the life or lives of others, and so blameworthy as to warrant the same criminal liability as that which the law imposes upon a person who intentionally causes a crime.

Seeing the state of our polarized society, on September 7th of this year Presidential Foundations and Centers across the United States for the first time ever issued [a joint statement](#) regarding the future of our nation. The statement included an urgent call for all Americans to honor the most basic principles of our humanity.

David J. Kramer, Executive Director of the George W. Bush Institute, contributed the following:

We are a country rooted in the rule of law, where the protection of the rights of all people is paramount. At the same time, we live among our fellow citizens, underscoring the importance of compassion, tolerance, pluralism, and respect for others.

Valerie Jarrett, CEO of the Obama Foundation, added:

This is a moment where we could all come together and show that democracy is not about partisan politics. It's about making our country strong, making our country more decent, more kind, more humane.

To ignore these basic principles of respect, decency and kindness – to be indifferent to the escalating violence and suffering in our country – is by definition depraved.

So what can we do?

Elie Wiesel appealed to our care for the next generation:

What about the children? Oh, we see them on television, we read about them in the papers, and we do so with a broken heart. Their fate is always the most tragic, inevitably. When adults wage war, children perish. We see their faces, their eyes. Do we hear their pleas? Do we feel their pain, their agony? Every minute one of them dies of disease, violence, famine.

And here is the point, he said:

Some of them -- so many of them -- could be saved.

Wiesel offered a shocking example:

The depressing tale of [the St. Louis is a case in point](#). Sixty years ago, its human cargo -- nearly 1,000 Jews -- was turned back to Nazi Germany. And that happened after the [Kristallnacht](#), after the first state sponsored pogrom, with hundreds of Jewish shops destroyed, synagogues burned, thousands of people put in concentration camps. And that ship, which was already in the shores of the United States, was sent back. I don't understand. Roosevelt was a good man, with a heart. He understood those who needed help.

Why didn't he allow these refugees to disembark? A thousand people -- in America, the great country, the greatest democracy, the most generous of all new nations in modern history. What happened? I don't understand. Why the indifference, on the highest level, to the suffering of the victims?

Wiesel went on to point out the many instances in which we have demonstrated our highest ideals as a nation, including the defeat of Nazism in World War II; but he suggested that it is the work of organized, committed people working outside the halls of power that make the difference:

But then, there were human beings who were sensitive to our tragedy. Those non-Jews, those Christians, that we call the [Righteous Gentiles](#), whose selfless acts of heroism saved the honor of their faith.

Wiesel then chided the powerful leaders in the room by asking, “Why were they so few?”

What is clear in Wiesel’s challenge, and in that of Dr. King, is that it takes the courage of a few to get the powerful to act.

It takes the courage of a few to challenge the indifference – the depraved indifference – of the powerful and the many.

The actions of these few, who risk their comfort and their lives, can change what we accept as “normal.” Their actions ease suffering and violence, and can change the course of history.