
UCF Forum

1-14-2015

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STARS Citation

Uttich, Laurie, "Bearing Witness Even When It Seems Too Much to Bear" (2015). *UCF Forum*. 66.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/66>

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Bearing Witness Even When It Seems Too Much to Bear

By Laurie Uttich

UCF Forum columnist

Wednesday, January 14, 2015

My husband wanted to go to Hitler's Eagle's Nest last summer as we traveled in Germany. We were planning our itinerary for our time in Munich and I responded as if he'd just admitted to buying tickets for "The Jerry Springer Show." Why would I want to go to the Alps retreat where Hitler hung out and chatted up "dignitaries"?

I'd seen enough photos of Hitler on the porch where he looked out over the mountains and plotted new ways to murder people while he waited for Eva to finish mixing the drinks. I understand it's an historical site and how that's important and interesting, but still I told my husband, "I'll find a beer garden and hang out until you get back."

We had planned to stop at Cologne on the way to Munich and I felt the same way about the National Socialism Documentation Centre. The only thing I knew about it was that it was the headquarters for the local Gestapo and while I understood its significance to history, I had no desire to see where the secret police treated the Holocaust as business as usual.

But I knew I needed to go to the Dachau concentration camp. I didn't want to tour the camp, particularly, because I also knew it would be painful to stand in that space where so many were tortured and murdered, to see the courtyard, the barracks, the electric fences, and, God, the crematorium. But I owed it to those who suffered and died to mourn however I could, to silently bear witness to the millions of atrocities those prisoners endured.

I was right about the purpose and power of visiting Dachau, but I was wrong about everything else.

I ended up going to Cologne's documentation center and I was moved immediately by the sign that read "In Memory of The Nazi Victims." I'm not sure what I expected, but every room in the center sought to expose the evil that occurred and to celebrate the human spirit that continued to reveal itself in spite of extreme suffering.

Prior to visiting, I didn't know the "documentation center" also includes a basement cellblock where the Gestapo held primarily political prisoners. In those cells, there are over 1,800 inscriptions on the walls. Men, women and even children as young as 14 wrote in their cells with pens, lipstick, chalk, and rocks. Some of them carved the stone with nails. I stood for hours in front of those walls, reading the translations of those who expressed fear, love, loss, indignation, pride, anger, desperation, and hope. All of these writers used words to give witness to the inhumanity of their situation and in doing so they retained their own humanity.

At Dachau, an exhibit shows how prisoners secretly wrote poems at the camp. In 1994, Dorothea Heiser collected 68 of those poems written by 32 inmates and published them into a collection titled "My Shadow in Dachau." These poems are translated from 10 different languages into English and they shine with the spirit of the poets' resilience. Some of these poets were writers before they entered Dachau and many were not, but all of them would have been executed if they had been caught writing.

Today, all sorts of writers who seek to give witness are still persecuted, of course. Last month, Reporters without Borders published its "round-up of abuses against journalists in 2014." The international group reported that 66 journalists were murdered last year, resulting in 720 murders in the past decade. There were also 119 kidnappings and currently 178 journalists are imprisoned. All of these abuses are connected to the work of journalists and didn't include the dead and injured members of the media who were gunned down at a Paris newspaper this month.

We honor those who risk their lives to share their stories or what they witness, but I often wonder about my own responsibility. I'm never going to be a journalist who crosses over to Syria, but I do force myself to read the work of the journalists who do.

I'd rather not read it. I feel helpless and hopeless when I learn the details of shell-shocked refugees, murdered schoolchildren, missing girls, gang rapes, and beheadings. It's easier not to pay attention and to click on Netflix. November marked the 25th anniversary since the United Nations adopted the Convention of the Rights of the Child

and for all those goals, as Susan Bissell of UNICEF writes, “We clearly must do more to protect our children.” Yes, I often think, but how? What do we do with the information we learn?

Elie Wiesel who wrote about his imprisonment in Nazi camps is quoted as saying, “I believe that anyone who lived through an experience is duty-bound to bear witness to it.” In 2012, Oprah Winfrey interviewed him and he stated he was once concerned that the memory of the Holocaust would be lost because survivors are becoming an “endangered species.” But, now, he told her, “I came up with a theory which I think is valid: To listen to a witness is to become one.”

I realize just listening isn’t enough. We must give what we can, stay active and aware, help out the person next to us and the one overseas, and pressure leaders with our votes and voices. But I also believe in the strength of numbers, the act of showing up—whether we’re holding a candle or check—and I believe in bearing witness to another person’s story. And I believe the sharing of that story makes it become part of our own.

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