

INDIFFERENCE BREEDS HATE



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I would like to extend my warmest thanks to *Academia* magazine for regularly taking simple, commonly-understood terms and concepts and entrusting them to experts and academics for thorough analysis from a wide range of perspectives. I was absolutely delighted, for example, to find that a recent issue was dedicated to Olga Tokarczuk's notion of "tenderness," which proved to be a fascinating intellectual exercise. But seeing this present edition, focused on numerous facets of the urgent call "Don't be indifferent" from my own Auschwitz speech in 2020, has come as a genuine surprise and a great honor.

My first, instinctive response is that I see a certain connection between tenderness and indifference. Lest someone accuse me of trying to bask in someone else's glory, let me explain what I mean.

In Poland and elsewhere in Europe, we are sinking ever deeper into a morass of hatred. Hate breeds hostility, hate breeds contempt, hate is the polar opposite of tenderness. And hate starts with indifference.

It seems to me that the concept of tenderness can be applied equally to the physical and mental spheres. It can describe mainly individuals, but also society as a whole. Indifference is similar in this respect. This is why before we can attain tenderness, we have to take the first step: we have to move beyond our own indifference.

When I spoke at Auschwitz, I was mainly focusing on indifference to the encroachment of deceitful, cunning yet seductive populism, creeping into the social sphere and into communal spirituality. This is precisely what causes – pardon me for paraphrasing myself – "Auschwitz to fall from the sky." But this does not happen out of the blue! It is the result and culmination of processes of desensitization, of a lack of tenderness, of compassion and empathy. And it's also because of our indifference to the many stages which came before Auschwitz.

After my speech, I was inundated with letters. Let me quote one here:

"Doesn't Auschwitz start much earlier than discriminatory legislation? Doesn't it arise within us, when we become indifferent to the suffering and humiliation experienced by people around us? When we turn away from this suffering and humiliation?"

I was thinking of this letter today. I am writing three days after the angry, tense "rainbow" protests on Warsaw's streets. Today I saw on TV the infamous megaphone-bearing minibus known as the "homopho-bus." It is owned by a pro-life organization, although it would be more appropriate to call it a pro-hate group. The bus is festooned with false, mendacious slogans filled with contempt and hate (this I saw for myself), and I have been told that the megaphone blares out equally false claims.

When public opinion is flooded with pseudoscientific assertions that "LGBT ideology" teaches four-year-olds how to masturbate and offers nine-year-olds their first erotic experiences and orgasms; when we hear that most pedophiles are gay and children brought up by single-sex parents are routinely subjected to abuse, shouldn't the natural response of any decent people be to empathize with those being stigmatized for belonging to the LGBT community?

Shouldn't it be natural for people to stand up for minority groups subjected to abuse and ejected from mainstream society, struggling to defend themselves against lies and propaganda?

Unfortunately it's all too easy for me to imagine minibuses covered in such slogans as "Jews are vermin!", "Jews carry out blood libel!", "Jews control the media!", "The Jewish cabal steals your money!" Would such slogans inciting hate and violence be permitted on our streets? Surely not, I would like to believe...

Then why should those I mentioned above, targeting LGBT people, be permitted? How can we possibly just ignore them? I have an uneasy conscience: how much indifference is there still lingering within me?

I cannot but end with the well-known, yet still relevant words of pastor Martin Niemoeller. Most of us probably don't know that he was an ardent supporter of his leader's totalitarian actions. Or that he must have become greatly disillusioned before he grasped what I am about to quote:

First they came for the socialists,
and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews,
and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no
one left to speak for me.

We must beware of indifference! ■



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