

Handout

Bridging the Gap between Sympathy and Action

Quote 1

Journalist Nicholas Kristof identifies one reason why many people do not respond when confronted with information about genocide or humanitarian disasters. Kristof refers to studies that demonstrate how people are more likely to help one person, or even one animal, than they are to help hundreds of suffering people:

“Advocates for the poor often note that 30,000 children die daily of the consequences of poverty—presuming that this number will shock people into action. But the opposite is true: the more victims, the less compassion. In one experiment, people in one group could donate to a \$300,000 fund for medical treatments that would save the life of one child—or, in another group, the lives of eight children. People donated more than twice as much money to help save one child as to help save eight.”¹

¹ Nicholas D. Kristof, “Save the Darfur Puppy,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2007, accessed June 12, 2009.

Quote 2

Psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton coined the term “psychic numbing” to refer to “a general category of diminished capacity or inclination to feel.”¹ Writing about the “numbing of everyday life,” he explains, “We are bombarded by all kinds of images and influences and we have to fend some of them off if we’re to take in any of them, or to carry through just our ordinary day’s work. . . .”² In her book *High Tide in Tucson*, novelist Barbara Kingsolver affirms Lifton’s observation that people numb themselves to disturbing information:

“Confronted with knowledge of dozens of apparently random disasters each day, what can a human heart do but slam its doors? No mortal can grieve that much. We didn’t evolve to cope with tragedy on a global scale. Our defense is to pretend there’s no thread of event that connects us, and that those lives are somehow not precious and real like our own. It’s a practical strategy, to some ends, but the loss of empathy is also the loss of humanity, and that’s no small tradeoff.”³

1 Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (Basic Books, 1986), 442.

2 Conversations with History, Robert Jay Lifton Interview, Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley, November 2, 1999.

3 Barbara Kingsolver, *High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never* (New York, Harper Perennial, 1996), 232.

Quote 3

Author Malka Drucker writes:

“Categorizing the rescuer can be misleading; it separates us from reality. We may prefer to believe that these people, examined collectively, possess incomprehensible heroism or goodness, because then we don’t have to speculate how we would behave in similar circumstances. Perhaps it is easier to acknowledge evil because we do not want to know that we have the same capacity for goodness. To understand these people as no different from us, possessing the same doubts, fears, and prejudices, raises the uncomfortable question, ‘Would I do what they did?’”¹

¹ Malka Drucker and Gay Block, *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust* (Holmes & Meier, 1992), 6.

Quote 4

Having studied rescuers during genocide, Ervin Staub argues:

“Goodness, like evil, often begins in small steps. Heroes evolve; they aren’t born. Very often the rescuers make only a small commitment at the start—to hide someone for a day or two. But once they had taken that step, they began to see themselves differently, as someone who helps. What starts as mere willingness becomes intense involvement.”¹

¹ Quoted in Daniel Goleman, “Great Altruists: Science Ponders Soul of Goodness,” *New York Times*, March 5, 1985, accessed May 25, 2016.

Quote 5

In 1966, Senator Robert Kennedy traveled to Cape Town, South Africa, during the height of apartheid—the system of racial segregation that existed in that country from 1948 to 1994. In his famous “Ripples of Hope” speech, Kennedy said:

“Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”¹

¹ Speech at the University of Cape Town, NUSAS Day of Affirmation, June 6, 1966.

Quote 6

Cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead said:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”¹

¹ Margaret Mead. Used with permission.