



2022

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Dieter F. Uchtdorf

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Recommended Citation

Uchtdorf, Dieter F. (2022) "Fellow Travelers, Brothers and Sisters, Children of God," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 61: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol61/iss1/5>

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Fellow Travelers, Brothers and Sisters, Children of God

Dieter F. Uchtdorf

Adapted from an address Elder Uchtdorf presented at the John A. Widtsoe Symposium at the University of Southern California, April 24, 2015.

For a long time, my wife, Harriet, and I felt a need to visit Auschwitz, the Nazi concentration camp and site of the brutal murders of millions during World War II. So when we were in Eastern Europe a few years ago, we made a point of making a pilgrimage to the site. One cannot visit such a place without coming away from it changed. We walked along the same paths that so many others had walked. One could almost see weary mothers holding the hands of terrified children; the hobbling steps of the elderly and the infirm; the despair in the eyes of those caught in a cold and terrible nightmare; the immeasurable sadness of those who understood what was about to happen. I could imagine them looking at one another—families, parents, children, loved ones, friends, and strangers—their eyes filled with fear, grief, and resignation. To this day my wife and I have a difficult time talking about our feelings in that place of unimaginable horror. In many ways, it is too painful to talk about.

As I stood there, I wondered yet again, “Who could have done something like this?” I had learned about the Holocaust and Auschwitz all my life. In Germany, this is not something that is talked about once every few years. It is addressed regularly. Harriet and I, our children, and our grandchildren all attended German schools that ensured we understood the cruelty and inhumanity that happened during this time. So although I was not surprised by what I saw, at the same time it all seemed so

incomprehensible. How could anyone be so heartless and past feeling to do this? Who but a demon could do such evil?

The commandant of Auschwitz for much of the time of its operation was Rudolf Höss, a man who grew up in a strict religious family. His father wanted him to enter the priesthood, but Rudolf abandoned the thought as he became immersed in politics. What kind of a person was he? Rudolf Höss described himself as “gentle, good-natured, and very helpful.”¹ His daughter remembers him as “the nicest man in the world.”² Later, at Nuremberg, his defense rested on the fact that he was only following orders; that he was doing his duty. Rudolf Höss supervised the murders of perhaps millions of people.³

The first Jews to be executed at Auschwitz were from Upper Silesia. I was born in Ostrava, not far from Upper Silesia. I am troubled to know that at the very time and at the very place when I was taking my first steps, soldiers from the Gestapo were rounding up terrified families and transporting them in railroad cars to that horrible place where they were destined to take their final steps.⁴

Although I was only a small child during the war, I still recognize that the actions of my people affected me and the entire world. They left an inexpressible sorrow and an inextinguishable agony that is still felt to this day throughout the world. As Harriet and I walked away from that place that has been hallowed by the blood of so many innocents, we felt changed. We were different. We had learned and relearned important lessons that we must never forget. Three insights forcibly entered my heart and mind on that day.

The First Insight: We Hate Those We Do Not Really Know

As I reflect on what happened in Germany years ago, it breaks my heart to think of the hatred of my people towards those of the Jewish faith, the Roma, the political opposition, and many other groups. That this hatred led to such horrific atrocities is something I still cannot completely understand. Historians, politicians, and sociologists have all attempted

1. Rudolph Höss, *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*, ed. Steven Paskuly, trans. Andrew Pollinger (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1992), 189.

2. Thomas Harding, “Hiding in N. Virginia, a Daughter of Auschwitz,” *Washington Post*, September 7, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/hiding-in-n-virginia-a-daughter-of-auschwitz/2013/09/06/1314d648-04fd-11e3-a07f-49ddc7417125_story.html.

3. The museum at Auschwitz states that four million people died at Auschwitz. Others estimate a number between 2.5 and 2.8 million. See Höss, *Death Dealer*, 38 n. 30.

4. Höss, *Death Dealer*, 28–29.

to explain what happened and why. And yet how can one truly understand such evil?

I am convinced that one of the major reasons these atrocities happened is because it is human nature to be suspicious, envious, distrustful, and even hateful of those we do not really know. I suppose we are all guilty of this to one extent or another. Do we really know even our neighbors and colleagues—people we greet daily? The great tragedy is, if only we could take the time to truly know the other person, we would discover that perhaps we are not so different after all. He who once was our enemy can become our friend.

Before the pandemic, when we assembled for general conference, street preachers of opposing religious views would assemble outside our Conference Center. Some of them were polite and desired to engage in rational conversation. However, some were provocative. They shouted insults and engaged in in-your-face confrontations, all the while attempting to escalate conflict. Some of them carried signs accusing Church members of everything from being possessed of Satan to using the wrong dinner fork for salads.

One Church member decided to do something that actually terrified him. He went up to one of the most vocal protestors and nervously asked him if he'd like to go to lunch later in the week. This simple act of offering to spend time with an adversary changed both of their lives. They ended up becoming friends. After that, when this street preacher came to Salt Lake twice a year to protest at general conference, he stayed at the LDS friend's house. He prayed with him and his family. The two of them had "lengthy, honest, and sincere conversations about the realities of [their] doctrinal differences, but [they] always show[ed] each other friendship and respect."⁵

These two men exemplify an important lesson: the more we get to know those who are different from us, the more we learn that perhaps they are not so different from us after all. And the more we understand this, the more likely we are to set aside our distrust and dislike of others.

The Second Insight: We Must Speak Up

We all have a responsibility to speak the truth; to stand for what is right; to lift up our voices in support of that which is good. Too often evil rises in the world because good men and women do not find the courage to

5. Bryan Hall, "How I Became Friends with a Conference Protester," *LDS Living*, October 1, 2013, <http://ldsliving.com/story/73834-how-i-became-friends-with-a-conference-protester>.

speak against it. And sometimes terrible, preventable events happen because we fail to open our mouths.

Avianca Flight 52

In January 1990, Avianca Flight 52 approached New York City. One hundred and fifty-eight people were on board the Boeing 707, including several children under the age of two who were coming to the United States to be adopted. In a terrible tragedy, the plane crashed, and seventy-three of the people on board lost their lives. Why did it crash? What caused this terrible tragedy?

The short answer is that the plane ran out of fuel. Fog and wind conditions had caused inbound delays and airspace congestion. And so the plane circled in the holding pattern, waiting for its turn to land. The crew reported to air traffic control that they were low on fuel but failed to communicate the seriousness of their situation. In addition, the cockpit crew was reluctant to question the judgment of the fifty-one-year-old captain, who had logged nearly 17,000 hours flying the Boeing 707. The captain and first officer, perhaps out of respect for the air traffic controllers, failed to demand a short approach for landing. When one air traffic controller passed responsibility for the flight to another, he neglected to state the nature of the emergency.

One person after another did not speak up clearly—perhaps out of respect for others, or because of timidity, or because of neglect. And so the engines of the Boeing 707 flamed out and the airplane crashed into a Long Island hillside. Perhaps the most tragic thing about this event is that it could have been prevented if only someone would have had the courage to speak up for the truth forcefully and courageously.

We Must Raise Our Voices

In a world where intolerance, meanness, and hatred are so easily accessible, we have a responsibility to speak up and defend what is good and right. We have all heard the profound statement, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”⁶ This applies

6. This quotation, of unknown origin, has been attributed to Edmund Burke, who expressed the same idea in much more complicated prose: “When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.” Edmund Burke, “Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents 82–83,” (1770), in *Select Works of Edmund Burke* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 1:146. A similar thought was expressed by John Stuart Mill: “Bad men need nothing more to

to us today. We have a responsibility to speak up for goodness, for virtue, for kindness, and understanding. We have an obligation to defend the weak and stand up for the downtrodden.

In this age, perhaps more than any other since the beginning of time, we are exposed to bullies and braggarts—people who belittle others and preen themselves in prideful arrogance. We can and must stand and let our voices be heard. We don't need to be provocative or belittling, but we must not allow our fears to prevent us from lifting our voices in defense of what is right and good and true.

I wonder how history might have been changed had the people of Germany spoken with one voice against the evil that rose around them. Perhaps future generations will ask the same of us today. It is not easy to stand in defense of what is right. We will likely face insult and ridicule. We will likely risk opposition and discomfort. Nevertheless, we must have the courage to do so.

The Third Insight: Divine Love Is the Answer

As I walked along the paths of Auschwitz, I wondered if there was any hope. Was mankind destined to reenact the same tragedy over and over, each generation writing its own verse and adding to the song of grief and sorrow of the ages? I so desperately wanted to hope it wasn't true that we learn from history that we cannot learn from history. The question that struck deep into my heart was, "Is there hope?" I believe there is. I know there is. And what is that hope?

Must we all believe the same creed? Espouse the same political opinions? Root for the same football team? No. That will never happen. Nevertheless, there is one virtue—one quality—that could solve all the world's ills, cure all the hatred, and mend every wound. If we only learned to *love God as our Father in Heaven*, this would give us *purpose* in life. If we only learned to *love our fellow man as our brothers and sisters*, this would give us *compassion*.

After all, these are God's great commandments—to love God and to love our fellow man. If we distill religion down to its essence, we nearly always recognize that love is not merely the goal of religion; it is the path of true discipleship. It is also the destination. If we love as Christ loved, if we truly follow the path he practiced and preached, there is a chance for

compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing." "Inaugural Address at the University of St. Andrews, February 1, 1867," in *Littell's Living Age*, no. 1189, fourth series, no. 50 (Boston: Littell and Gay, March 16, 1867), 664.

us to avoid the echoing tragedies of history and the seemingly unavoidable fatal flaws of man.

Will compassion for others bring light into the darkness? Will it allow us to part the clouds and see clearly? Yes. For though we are all born blind, through the Light of Christ we can see past darkness and illusion and understand things as they really are. I am convinced that had my countrymen felt and applied the power of divine love and compassion, the Holocaust never would have happened. The evil that befell the world would have been prevented. Such heartache would not have descended upon the planet.

It is easy to love those who wear the same color of jerseys that we do. It is easy to forgive those who are like us. But what about those who are not on our team? What about those who hate us? Who curse us?

We are to love our enemies. “Bless them that curse [us], do good to them that hate [us], and pray for them which despitefully use . . . and persecute [us].” For as we do this, as we love our enemies, we truly begin to be worthy of our heritage as “children of [our] Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:44–45). We must love all of God’s children because they are our brothers and sisters. Even—and perhaps especially—we must love those who are different from us or just appear strange.

This conviction and resolve to overcome our lower instincts and truly love all mankind regardless of race, religion, political ideology, and socioeconomic circumstances is one of the grand objectives of our human existence. It is the essence of pure religion. It may not be an easy thing to do, but it is worth doing, and we can do it.

We Are All of One Family

Today, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints connects cultures, nationalities, languages, and people of every socioeconomic status. It encourages people to be good citizens, to care for those who are in distress, to be kind to others, and to nurture and build loving, respectful families. Today, Church members seek to create goodwill among people of all religious beliefs and political persuasions, and of every race. Our eleventh Article of Faith states, “We claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may” (A of F 1:11).

We members of the Church know what it means to be a minority. Throughout our history, we have been discriminated against and persecuted as a result of our religious beliefs. More recently, we are experiencing

the growing pains of becoming a majority in some areas—which creates its own challenges. In both cases, we understand that the rights of all men—whether they are in the minority or the majority—must be preserved and safeguarded. Although we do not know what the coming years and decades will bring, we trust that because of our sincere beliefs and strong faith, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will be numbered among those who are a force for good and are advocates for peace and brotherly love among all nations.

What we have in common as the people of the world is of far greater significance than what divides us. We must try to really understand and to really know one another. We must raise our voices in defense of what is just and good. We must increase our genuine love for God and our fellow man. This is our greatest hope of preventing the ever-repeating catastrophes that have plagued this planet since its earliest days. It is my hope that we will look past our differences and, instead, see each other with eyes that recognize who we truly are—fellow travelers, brothers and sisters, pilgrims walking the same path that leads to becoming more enlightened and more refined, as our Father in Heaven intends us to become.

Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf was sustained as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on October 2, 2004. He was called as second counselor in the Church's First Presidency on February 3, 2008, and served in that position until January 2018. He has served as a General Authority since April 1994. Dieter Uchtdorf and Harriet Reich married in 1962. They have two children, six grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren.