

Becoming the Authors of Our Own Lives: Excerpt from *How Holocausts Happen*

Background

The following excerpt, from Douglas V. Porpora's *How Holocausts Happen: The United States in Central America*, requires a little set up. Porpora explores the response of United States citizens to their government's activities in South America to the response of the German public during the Nazi regime. Between 1979 and 1987, he writes,

the United States armed, trained and financially backed the military forces of the government of El Salvador, which over the same period carried out a policy of ongoing, systematic murder against the Salvadorian population. I am not speaking here of military actions taken against guerrilla combatants. Instead, I am speaking of the systematic murder of over seventy thousand men, woman, and children who were noncombatants – journalists, priests, nuns, teachers, labor organizers, students, political figures, and others. Roughly 1 percent of El Salvador's population was so destroyed. Also as a direct result of United States' actions, another seventy thousand civilians were similarly murdered during the same period by the military government of Guatemala. Finally, and again during the same period, the United States created a force of counterrevolutionaries (the 'contras') to overthrow the revolutionary [and democratically elected] Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Nor, in contrast with other guerrilla armies, did they focus their attacks on military targets. Instead, they deliberately attacked defenseless civilians, including old people women and children. (Page 7)

While the US did not carry out these acts itself, it intentionally created the conditions for this to happen – supplying the weapons, training the combatants, and financially backing the whole thing. Despite the slaughter, the US public was largely silent on the matter. There was a bit of resistance when three US nuns and a lay woman were brutally raped and murdered in El Salvador, but generally the protests were small and ineffective.

Porpora's book examines how and why the American public was so passive in the face of these atrocities. He notes that while it was dangerous to oppose Nazism, US citizens would not have risked their livelihood or lives by protesting the actions of their government – so why were they indifferent?

In exploring this question, Porpora concludes that good citizenship requires us to read widely and deeply – to be more than passive consumers of knowledge. He asserts that we need to take responsibility for understanding what's happening in the world and holding ourselves and our governments – those who act in our name – accountable. That's what it means to be a good citizen – and, ultimately, what it means to be a good human.

Excerpt from *How Holocausts Happen: The United States in Central America*

Many Americans of course will say, must say, 'We did not know.' That is our shame, as it was the shame of Germany before us. It was our duty to know. Right action requires right belief, to do the right, we must know what the right is. Otherwise, no matter how well-intentioned, our actions may do more harm than good. After the Holocaust, knowledge itself must become our responsibility.

Most people are not used to considering knowledge a responsibility. When it comes to responsibility, we tend to focus on our actions, not on what is inside our heads. We tend to assume that if we act in good faith, that is, if we act on whatever knowledge we have with the best of intentions, then what we do is not really blameworthy, even if it has negative consequences. Of course, we are aware that in some contexts we are responsible for being knowledgeable. Ignorance of the laws, most of us realize, is no excuse for illegal activity. If we are to be law-abiding citizens, it is our responsibility to know what the law is. There are other contexts where we also recognize that someone is blameworthy for some well-intended but uninformed action because that person had a responsibility to know more than he or she did. Of such cases are medical malpractice suits made.

For most of us, however, such contexts appear marginal to our lives. Our morality is centered more on our actions than on our knowledge. That must change, for knowledge too is an act. Most of us think of knowledge as something we acquire passively, as something that is poured into us. That is perhaps why we do not hold ourselves as strenuously responsible for what we know. It appears rather to be more the responsibility of those others – schools, parents, government, the media – who socialize us.

This receptacle conception of knowledge is, however, a grievous distortion. Consider that if our actions are based on what we know, and all we know is what has been fed to us by others, then we are nothing but wind-up toys that perform as programmed. We are nothing but the objects of causal forces operating on us. As the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche observed, we are nothing but so many 'factory products,' travelling 'herd' fashion through our lives. Is this our destiny, to be part of a herd; to be factory products, all mouthing the same ideas; to be objects.

Oh, but in America, we are all individuals. So my students tell me. Yet 90 percent of these young adults are majoring in the same thing. Ninety percent have the identical goal in life – to make lots of money. Virtually all believe without question that the United States is the best country in the world. Nearly all accept as a matter of faith that human beings are by nature selfish, aggressive, and competitive. Where is their individuality? In what they consume. Some want Porsches and some want BMWs. Some listen to Sting and some listen to the Stones. Some drink Coors and some drink Bud. There you have it: a nation of individuals. A people like this who can mistake differing consumption patterns for individuality are themselves victims. They are victims, however, who as a part of a society gone mad can also be victimizers.

For our own sakes, our individuality must become more than the mere intersection of different market segments. There is more to living a rich life than consuming different brands of the same things. We must become what we were meant to be: subjects, not objects. How are we to do that? Again Nietzsche tells us: 'Live dangerously.'

Without danger, there is no growth. Without danger, we stay as we are. However, the danger we must face is not primarily physical but spiritual. We must put our ideas, our values, and our goals to the test. We must constantly examine our lives. Self-examination must be a life-long vocation. We must confront points of view that differ from our own. We must never allow ourselves to simply accept what we have been told, what has been programmed into us. We must instead demand of ourselves that we have good reasons for what we believe. When we cannot find such reasons, we must reevaluate our thinking. That does not mean that we necessarily have to totally reject our own point of view, although it may sometimes come to that. It does mean, at least, that our views will have to become more sophisticated, more nuanced, less prejudiced.

This is a process of personal growth. It is the only way to make our ideas our own. Unless we subject our ideas to rigorous test – rejecting those that are indefensible, refining others, perhaps keeping the rest unchanged – our ideas remain someone else’s input, and we remain objects, acted upon. Only through critical examination do we become the subjects of our own knowledge, the initiators of what we believe, the authors of our own lives.

Let there be no mistake. The path of critical reflection is a dangerous one. We risk losing our illusions, in many of which we are strongly invested. No one, for example, can find it pleasant to learn that one’s country is not what it is supposed to be, that one’s leaders are engaged in a colossal evil. That is a painful truth to face. It is all the more painful when one considers one’s own complicity in such evil. However, if we allow ourselves to shrink from such truths, if we allow ourselves to set up psychological defense mechanisms to deny what is true, if we do not even allow ourselves to question for fear of what we may find out, we forsake our responsibility to others and lose our integrity. If we stay neutral while good and evil clash in front of us, we end up leading small, meaningful lives.

There is a danger too that the truth will change us, make us different from what we were. That too can be discomfoting. We Americans live in a comfortable world of designer, McDonald’s hamburgers, and situation comedies. There is an everydayness to it all in which evil has no place. Certainly, we see crime and we see fires, but nothing that we personally have to do anything about, nothing that personally touches us. When that everydayness is shattered by the recognition not only that evil is in our midst but that our own lives are a part of it, we are confronted with an existential choice: to radically change our lives or go on living as before. We saw protesters and thought them fanatical. We heard critics and thought them cranks. Now we have to consider becoming alien like them, not our old comfortable selves at all. Of course that is frightening.

This is why intellectuals, truth seekers require courage. This is why the pursuit of knowledge is a heroic act. However, it is a heroism that is demanded by our times, by our responsibility to others around us, and finally by our responsibility to ourselves. Unless we summon the courage to face the danger, we will not grow. We will die with the beliefs we were born with.

The pursuit of truth is demanding. It is not for the lazy. It means we have to read, reflect, and engage in dialogue with those we disagree with. It means we have to debate with others those things we were all taught never to discuss: politics and religion. However, the pursuit of truth is also rewarding. We do not

always find that our comfortable notions have to be discarded. Sometimes they are confirmed and deepened. But that is not all. By testing and confirming what we may have previously thought, we have made those thoughts our own; we have transformed them from input into self-generated ideas. When we seek answers to questions of our own making, when our answers lead us to new questions, we acquire knowledge not as passive receptacles but as active subjects. When this knowledge changes and makes us grow, it is we who are changing and growing ourselves. In the process we become true human individuals.

To live life this way is to live as an intellectual. This is all that being an intellectual means; to assume responsibility for our own beliefs and to summon the courage and effort necessary to test them. Today, we must all become intellectuals. Being intellectual is not just the job of bookworms in the ivory tower. It has to be a dimension of each of our lives. If we do not live this way our entire lives, we will not suddenly do so when the situation calls for it. We owe it to ourselves, and we owe it to others. We live in what is still the most powerful nation on earth, and its actions reverberate throughout the entire world. People everywhere rely on us to insure that our government behaves responsibly. What are we to tell them? That we do not know how to think; we leave that to university professors. That we do not know how to rule; we leave that to our rulers. What will the world think of us if we are not more responsible than this?

From: Douglas V. Porpora, *How Holocausts Happen: The United States in Central America*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992) 197-201.