

# ***Leadership, the Holocaust, Genocide, and Education***

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**keynote speaker  
2009 Hildebrandt Award Presentations  
Cohen Center for Holocaust Studies at Keene State College**

**April 20, 2009**

Thank you for inviting me to share my thoughts on leadership, the Holocaust, genocide, and education. Although I so wished to be with you in person, I am listening and watching. It is a pleasure to join you virtually. As most of you know, I moved from Keene to Alaska in 2003 with my husband, Gary Kofinas, to join the faculty at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Our time there has been a grand adventure but in spirit and heart, I never left you all here at Keene State. The memories of our shared enterprise in making Keene a center of excellence continue to give me enormous pride as one of my greatest professional pursuits.

It is with great humility that I explore tonight's topic. As history tells us, the role of leadership in the Holocaust and past genocides was always critical. But I would argue that in today's world of increasing connectivity, globalization, changing climate, political instability, as well as competition for scarce resources like water, oil, timber, copper, and lebensraum (in other words, living space), leadership has increased relevance.

I do not consider myself a scholar of or an expert on the topic of genocide education. I am simply a student of organizations, a Jew who happened to be born in the early 40s, and a US citizen who is captivated by the difficult and pressing questions of how and why horrific events of humanity come to pass. And more proactively, I wonder how we can avert ongoing and future atrocities. I am also particularly motivated by a realization that our human capacity for cruelty hasn't changed; but the technology we have at our disposal to execute this cruelty becomes more potent every day.

It is these current challenges that point to the important connection between understanding the sources of the Holocaust and the solutions to genocides of today and tomorrow. These challenges also motivate me to think carefully about the role of leadership in social activism.

In Alaska, University of Alaska President Mark Hamilton has entrusted me with the remarkable privilege of launching the Northern Leadership Center. This task has provided me the opportunity to network and cultivate leadership in a region of our country where there is high cultural diversity, conflicting interests in use of land and resources, and enormous potential for sustainability. While launching the Northern

Leadership Center, my study of the Holocaust and my past work with many of you at the Cohen Center have served as reference points in raising my own awareness of how individuals affect organizational change and how the course of history can be shaped by the efforts of one person to mobilize the actions of many others.

I define leadership as having three parts: first is seeing what needs to be done to make things better or seeing a problem that needs fixing; second is having the vision, the skill, and the wherewithal to change the system; and third is the most important task of mobilizing the energy of others to organize and act in ways to achieve that vision.

Victoria Barnett (2000) writes about bystanders, victims, perpetrators, and rescuers of the Holocaust. Her definitions of these roles have helped me understand the roles individuals can assume and the social processes they create that lead to atrocities. Of these roles, it is that of bystander which is the most disturbing to me--both as it relates to genocide and in our day-to-day life. How many of us can spare a dime? The question is not whether we should spare the dime, but how we perceive the person asking. Do we drop a dime in the cup or simply walk by, which is the bystander approach? Do we think of the person with the outstretched cup as having his own life history and identity or do we see him as just an example of homelessness? If we read about someone who has been tortured at Abu Graib, is it just another shocking news story or can we relate on an empathetic, individual level?

During the past few weeks of dealing with a medical challenge most of us never expect to face, I have developed a new sensitivity for who genuinely feels my physical and emotional pain and who maintains an emotional distance. There are those, like my anesthesiologist, who had tears in his eyes when he saw my hardship and took the lead role my pain management treatment. My relationship with him is so much more than a wringing of the hands. He has the capacity to do what needs to be done, as many of us do; but beyond that, he has taken the risk of opening up enough personally to feel what I was feeling, and to go outside his role of making sure my physical pain was resolved.

Daily we are bombarded by e-mails about saving the rain forest, protecting women's reproductive rights, rescuing the victims of latest climate catastrophe, taking the one last chance to end the genocide in Darfur; but we are too overwhelmed, too jaded. Will our efforts really help? Sure, we can throw some money at the problem and feel that we've "Done Something." How do we respond? Some of us recognize the problems, are willing to make the effort, and are able take the considerable personal sacrifices or risks to confront the problems, but lack the organizational skills to implement change. Others of us have a compelling vision of a better future but don't have either the courage or conviction to do what needs to be done. It's not my job; I can't be bothered, I'm too busy, it's too much work, why run the risk of being noticed? And there are still others who cannot stay the course or who are unable, in the face of evidence that our efforts aren't working, to modify the course. The consequence of all these responses is a bystander who hopes that the problem will get resolved -- hopes that the government, a citizen's group, a foundation, another person will get things done. In the end hope alone doesn't help.

So, then, how do we move beyond our passive roles as bystanders and embrace social activism in a world where there is a desperate need for meaningful leaders? The Holocaust teaches volumes on how leaders

can make a difference, and each story carries helpful lessons in how vision generates inspiration, which leads to action, which ultimately brings a better world. *Anwar Sadat*, one of the most inspiring leaders for me, *showed us how a political leader can transform international relationships* with a vision of a solution to a seemingly intractable problem. When his plane touched down on Israeli soil, half the world thrilled to his courage while the other half, fearing his leadership, mobilized to kill him for damaging the status quo.

In 1939, *Hannah Senesch* escaped the growing anti-Semitism in Hungary to join the Zionist movement in Israel. She parachuted into Yugoslavia in 1944 in an effort to rescue Hungarian Jews who were being captured and tortured by the Nazis. Hannah knew what would happen to her were she to be captured, and ultimately *showed the world how bravery, courage, and the willingness to take risks are essential aspects of leadership*.

*Those who organized the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto*, knowing with 100% certainty that they would not be able to save anyone, including themselves, led the fight against impossible odds. *Their story illustrates the need to try, regardless of chances of success*.

*Raoul Wallenberg*, the Swedish diplomat who issued protective passports to Jews and whose life was ultimately sacrificed in the effort, *helps us today to understand the importance of perpetuating the human ideals of justice*.

*André Trocmé* was a pastor in the tiny French village of Le Chambon who spoke out against the Nazis and encouraged his congregation to hide Jewish refugees. His use of the pulpit and organization of an entire community *illustrates the power of the moral compass when linking spirituality and universal human values*. The actions of the villagers, inspired by the leadership of their pastor, helped save thousands of Jewish lives in spite of their personal danger in taking action.

*Mark Hanis*, a compelling young man who is the son of Holocaust survivors, started an excellent new organization called the Genocide Intervention Network. The mission of this network is to empower communities and individuals with the tools to prevent and stop genocide. By partnering with a host of other anti-genocide organizations for a month of action and remembrance, the Genocide Intervention Network is building public support to call on the international community to take meaningful actions when “early warning” indicators signal possible onset of mass-scale atrocities. Together, these organizations will mobilize resources to avert or halt such ongoing crises and protect civilians from mass atrocities. *In this case we learn how an inspired individual can help create a system for avoiding potential atrocities*.

As I read the stories of those who took leadership in Holocaust and in other social causes, I see those who questioned authority, who organized others to take action, who created social networks that extended the actions of a few to the actions of many, who held zero tolerance for hypocrisy, who took the risk of infiltrating the rank and file to create change from within, who risked the wrath of others, who endured isolation, and who used their skills as writers, artists and poets, to instill a deeper meaning on social conditions and promote reflection and social learning.

How then does society, and more specifically how does Keene State College, cultivate leaders who will mobilize others?

I know from my own research that some of key ingredients for cultivating leaders include providing good role models, allowing incremental success, creating an environment where it is okay to take risks, and establishing a norm of viewing failure as a learning opportunity. Other ingredients include openness to a diversity of perspectives, having access to sufficient resources, having places where the “happy bumpings into” allow for generation of networks, building idea banks, and having access to frequent, supportive and honest feedback.

Keene State has many of these key ingredients and the Hildebrandt awards recognize some of them. Colleges and universities allocate enormous resources to infrastructure, research, and special educational programs. Students who question the status quo, rally their cohort, work towards social and political change are rarely appreciated or honored. Rather, those who lead these charges are likely to be marginalized or ostracized. But we have, and continue to, demonstrate how the Keene State College community is different. From Chuck Hildebrandt’s single course in sociology of the Holocaust we grew an academic program into a concentration, then a minor in Holocaust Studies, and now the Board of Regents has approved our Major in Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Although we are a small institution, people on this campus have shown repeatedly how leadership matters in building a commitment to study and social action.

In my time at Keene State, it was Chuck Hildebrandt, Jerry Lenthall, Larry Benequist, Jay Kahn, Anna Tilton, Paul Vincent, Tom White, Bob Golden, Helen Frink, Nona Fienberg, Teresa Siebert and, of course, Jan Cohen who had a vision and mobilized resources. There have been many others since my departure. Without the support of President Giles Gee and Center Director Hank Knight, the Cohen Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies would not have made its rapid progress. These people have set an example and fostered the institution in such a way that we truly live by the motto carved into the granite posts on Appian Way: “Enter to learn, go forth to serve.”

I am honored that the new leadership award in my name speaks directly to that motto. I am especially excited about the way dual recipients of the singular award will connect in meaningful ways to foster mentorship and synergy. If my efforts have inspired others to be aware of injustice, to study issues and to take action, I will know that I have made a difference. Thank you all for the opportunities you’ve given to me to learn, to serve, to see the successful results of our teamwork in action, and to make a difference. And I am confident that those who follow will live our credo with honor.

#### Bibliography:

Barnett, Victoria J.(2002) Bystanders: Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust. Greenwood Press. Westport.