The “In” Group

Often being accepted by others is more satisfying than being accepted by oneself, even though the satisfaction does not last. Too often our actions are determined by the moment.

My eighth grade consisted of 28 students most of whom knew each other from the age of five or six. The class was close-knit and we knew each other so well that most of us could distinguish each other’s handwriting at a glance. Although we grew up together, we still had class outcasts. From second grade on, a small elite group spent a large portion of their time harassing two or three of the others. I was one of those two or three, though I don’t know why. In most cases when children get picked on, they aren’t good at sports or they read too much or they wear the wrong clothes or they are of a different race. But in my class, we all read too much and didn’t know how to play sports. We had also been brought up to carefully respect each other’s races. This is what was so strange about my situation. Usually, people are made outcasts because they are in some way different from the larger group. But in my class, large differences did not exist. It was as if the outcasts were invented by the group out of a need for them. Differences between us did not cause hatred; hatred caused differences between us.

The harassment was subtle. It came in the form of muffled giggles when I talked, and rolled eyes when I turned around. If I was out in the playground and approached a group of people, they often fell silent. Sometimes someone would not see me coming and I would catch the tail end of a joke at my expense.

I also have a memory of a different kind. There was another girl in our class who was perhaps even more rejected than I. She also tried harder than I did for acceptance, providing the group with ample material for jokes. One day during lunch I was sitting outside watching a basketball game. One of the popular girls in the class came up to me to show me something she said I wouldn’t want to miss. We walked to a corner of the playground where a group of three or four sat. One of them read aloud from a small book, which I was told was the girl’s diary. I sat down and, laughing till my sides hurt, heard my voice finally blend with the others. Looking back, I wonder how I could have participated in mocking this girl when I knew perfectly well what it felt like to be mocked myself. I would like to say that if I were in that situation today I would react differently, but I can’t honestly be sure. Often being accepted by others is more satisfying than being accepted by oneself, even though the satisfaction does not last. Too often our actions are determined by the moment.

REPRINTED FROM:
Resource Book Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior
with the permission of the Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation
LEGACIES

I think that the courage to confront evil and turn it by dint of will into something applicable in the development of our evolution, individually and collectively is exciting, honorable.

Maya Angelou is an artist whose life defies labels. She is a novelist, poet, actor, composer, director, and civil rights activist. She is also a woman with a strong sense of identity. In an interview, she spoke of the people who helped her make the most of her unique talents and skills. She particularly recalled her uncle Willie.

I was sent to him when I was three from California and he and my grandmother owned the only black-owned store in the town. He was obliged to work in the store, but he was severely crippled. So he needed me to help, and my brother. So at about four he started us to learn to read and write and do our times tables. In order to get me to do my times tables, he would take me behind my neck—my clothes—and stand me in front of a pot-bellied stove. And he would say, “Now, sister, do your sixes.” I did my sixes. I did my sevens. Even now, after an evening of copious libation, I can be awakened at eleven o’clock at night and asked, “Will you do your elevenses?” I do my elevenses with alacrity.

A few years back, my uncle died, and I went to Little Rock and was met by Miss Daisy Bates. She told me, “Girl, there’s somebody who wants to meet you.” I said that I’d be glad to meet whoever. She said, “Good looking man.” I said, “Indeed, yes, certainly.” So that evening she brought a man over to the hotel. He said, “I don’t want to shake your hand. I want to hug you.” And I agreed. He said, “You know, Willie has died in Stamps [Arkansas].” Well, now Stamps is very near to Texas. And Little Rock, when I was growing up, was as exotic as Cairo, Egypt, Buda and Pest. This man knew where Stamps was, and my crippled uncle?

He said, “Because of your uncle Willie I am who I am today.” He said, “In the 20s, I was the only child of a blind mother. Your uncle gave me a job in your store, made me love to learn, and taught me my times tables.” I asked him how did he do that and he said, “He used to grab me [by the neck].” He said, “I guess you want to know who I am today.”

“Yes, sir.”

He said, “I’m Bussick, vice-mayor of Little Rock, Arkansas.” He went on to become the first black mayor of Little Rock, Arkansas.

He said, “When you get down to Stamps, look up” and he gave me the name of a lawyer. He said, “he’s a good old boy. He will look after you properly.” I went
down expecting a middle-aged black man, and a young white man leapt to his feet. He said, “Miss Angelou, I am just delighted to meet you. Why you don’t understand. Mr. Bussick called me today. Mr. Bussick is the most powerful black man in the state of Arkansas, but more important than that, he’s a noble man. Because of Mr. Bussick, I am who I am today.” I said, “Let me sit down first.”

He said, “I was an only child of a blind mother, and when I was eleven years old, Mr. Bussick got hold of me and made me love to learn. And I’m now in the State Legislature.”

That which lives after us. I look back at Uncle Willie: crippled, black, poor, unexposed to the worlds of great ideas, who left for our generation and generations to come a legacy so rich….

We need the courage to create ourselves daily. To be bodacious enough to create ourselves daily. As Christians, as Jews, as Muslims, as thinking, caring, laughing, loving human beings. I think that the courage to confront evil and turn it by dint of will into something applicable to the development of our evolution, individually and collectively is exciting, honorable.

REPRINTED FROM:
Resource Book Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior
with the permission of the Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation
A Nation United

The Danes were able to resist the cruel stupidity of Nazi anti-Semitism because this fundamental truth [thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself] was important to them.

Oskar Schindler responded to the plight of European Jews as an individual. In Le Chambon, people responded as a community. In Denmark, they responded as a nation.

The Germans conquered Denmark in the spring of 1940. Although Hitler allowed the prewar government to stay in power and kept only a token military force in the nation, the Danes deeply resented the occupation of their country and some struck back with acts of sabotage, riots, and strikes. In the summer of 1943, the Nazis decided to retaliate. They limited the power of King Christian X, forced the Danish government to resign, and disbanded the Danish army. They also ordered the arrest of a number of Christian and Jewish leaders.

Leo Goldberger’s father, the chief cantor at Copenhagen’s Great Synagogue, was among those the Nazis planned to arrest. They arrived at the family’s apartment before dawn one morning. Goldberger recalls what happened next.

My father came into my brother’s and my room and whispered that the Germans were outside and that he would not under any circumstances open the door. For me, this was the most terror-filled moment I had ever experienced. The insistent knocks of rifle butts. Fearing that they would break down the door any minute, I implored my father to open it, but he was determined not to. Then in the nick of time, we heard our upstairs neighbor’s voice telling the German soldiers that we—the Goldbergers—were away for the summer, and that three o’clock in the morning was in any case no time to make such a racket!

Although the Germans posted a guard outside the building before they left, the family managed to escape. By the middle of September, the crisis seemed to be over and the family returned to Copenhagen. A few weeks later, the Goldbergers and other Jews in Denmark learned that the Germans were planning to round them all up for deportation. The news came from Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, a German diplomat stationed in Norway. When he received secret orders to prepare four cargo ships for transporting Danish Jews, he passed on the information to leaders in the resistance. They in turn, informed Copenhagen’s Jewish community. The Jews were urged to hide and then prepare for evacuation to Sweden. Goldberger, who was just thirteen years old at the time, remembers:

Where to hide? Our first night was spent as guests of a wealthy Jewish family who lived in Bedbaek, on the coast some 35 miles away. To our chagrin the family took off for Sweden during the night without even telling us or their Jewish refugee maid. Apparently my father had been asked by our host whether
he wanted to chip in for a boat to take us all to Sweden but had been forced to
decline. He simply did not have that kind of money. Near panic but determined
to “get tough” and to find a way somehow, my father took a train back to the city;
he needed to borrow money, perhaps get an advance on his salary and to see about
contacts for passage on a fishing boat. As luck would have it, on the train a
woman whom he knew only slightly recognized him and inquired about his
obviously agitated facial expression. He confided our plight. Without a
moment’s hesitation the lady promised to take care of everything. She would
meet my father at the main railroad station with all the information about the
arrangements within a few hours. It was the least she could do, she said, in return
for my father’s participation some years back in a benefit concert for her
organization—”The Women’s League for Peace and Freedom.”

True to her word, she met my father later that day and indicated that all was arranged.
The money would be forthcoming from a pastor, Henry Rasmussen…. The sum was a
fairly large one—about 25,000 Danish crowns, 5,000 per person, a sum which was more
than my father’s annual salary. (Though it was ostensibly a loan, I should add that pastor
Rasmussen refused repayment after the war.) The next step was to head for a certain
address near the coast, less than an hour from Copenhagen. After hurriedly getting some
things together from our apartment—a few clothes, some treasured papers and family
photos, and, in my case, [a] newly acquired police flashlight—we were off by taxi to our
unknown hosts for the night and our uncertain destiny.

The following night we were standing, huddled in some low bushes along the
beach near Dragur, an outskirt of Copenhagen’s island of Amager. It was a bitter
cold October night. My youngest brother, barely three years old, had been given
a sleeping pill to keep him quiet. My brave and stoic little mother was clutching
her bag with socks and stockings to be mended which she had taken along for
reasons difficult to fathom rationally. We were anxiously and eagerly waiting for
the promised light signal. As we were poised to move toward the signal, I could
not help but wonder why this was happening. What had we ever done to be in
hiding, escaping like criminals? Where would it all end? And why in God’s
name did the signal not appear? Then finally the lights flashed. We were off.
Wading straight into the sea, we walked out some 100 feet through icy water, in
water that reached up to my chest. My father carried my two small brothers on
his arm. My mother held on to her bag of socks. And I clutched my precious
flashlight. My older brother tried valiantly to carry the suitcases but finally had to
drop them in the water. We were hauled aboard the boat, directed in whispers to
lie concealed in the cargo area, there to stretch out covered by smelly canvases; in
the event the German patrols were to inspect the boat, we would be passed over as
fish. There seemed to have been some 20 other Jews aboard. As we proceeded
out toward open sea my father chanted a muted prayer from the Psalms.

A few hours later, bright lights and the pastoral scenery of Skane along the coast
outline of Sweden appeared. Wonderful, peaceful Sweden. A welcoming haven,
never to be forgotten, where we remained until our return to Denmark at the end of the war in 1945.

*It was a community effort—organized and paid for by hundreds of private citizens—Jews and Christians alike.*

Hundreds of other fishing boats carried nearly every Jew in Denmark-7,220 men, women, and children-to safety. It was a community effort-organized and paid for by hundreds of private citizens-Jews and Christians alike. The money was used to pay fishermen to transport the Jews to Sweden. Although a few offered their boats for nothing, many could not afford to lose a day’s pay. The money also went for bribes. It was no accident that all German patrol ships were docked for repairs the night of the rescue.

Not everyone managed to get out. Some were captured as they waited for a boat, while others were picked up at sea. But in the end, the Nazis were able to deport only 580 Jews. They were sent to Terezinstadt, the “model” concentration camp. Still, no Dane was shipped to a death camp, in part because the Danish government constantly questioned the Nazis about their status.

**REPRINTED FROM:**
Resource Book Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior
with the permission of the Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation