

A Reason for Survival
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"Man's inhumanity to man is much worse than what any animal would do to another animal." This grim statement sits at the heart of Holocaust survivor Georgia Gabor's testimony and attests to her remarkable ability to extract a universal moral truth from great personal grief. Her conclusion about man's capacity for inhumanity is one that people are often reluctant to accept. Gabor elaborates to say that, while animals kill each other for survival, men will torture and murder based only on personal ideology-the influence of one man's ideology in particular had an unimaginable effect on her life. She grew up in Hungary in wealth and comfort under the care of well-educated parents. They were so assimilated that when news came of the Nazis committing atrocities against Jews, her parents felt certain such a thing could never happen there. Even with a smuggled letter describing how Jews were being used as human minesweepers at the Russian front, they still didn't believe it could happen in Hungary. Photographs of the mutilation of Jews in neighboring countries were met with the assumption that the victims must be criminals. Gabor's father was unable to accept that it could simply be a brazen act of violence.

Gabor knows too well that it is human nature to turn away from these unspeakable atrocities, to insist that although it is happening there, although it is happening to them, it could never happen here, it could never happen to us. These memories of her family, the people she loved and respected most, seeing evidence of a pogrom yet continuing to insist that it could never affect them, forever shaped the way Gabor views the world. With her entire family slaughtered, she escaped, without an understanding of why God chose to save her. Gabor understands now that her purpose is to make people understand that these crimes against humanity are possible; as hard as they may be to look at, hear about, or talk about. They do not stop at any border, pardon any victim, or heed any tangible sense of morality that we know.

As Gabor describes the physical and mental toll of documenting her story, her bravery becomes clear. She is well aware of how few survivors are able and willing to describe and relive the horrors they experienced, and she chose to push through that hardship to rise to the purpose God left her on Earth to fulfill. I am left in awe of her tenacity, and I believe in her profoundly relevant purpose: start conversations about injustice and speak for those who have suffered at the hands of oppressors. We cannot ignore the inhumanity of our society and pretend that it will never reach our doors for the sake of our own comfort. We must make ourselves uncomfortable and try to understand how these things can happen. It is, after all, the only way we can try to make sure they never happen again.

Gabor's purpose in testifying reminded me of my visit to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. It was impossible not to feel despondent when confronted with the story of this heinous genocide. However, Gabor's story communicates another feeling: hope. A hope that if dedicated people choose to document the stories of those who cannot do so themselves, then perhaps history doesn't need to repeat itself. This inspires me to use my own privilege to spread stories of tolerance and compassion in response to persecution. When Gabor asked herself, "Why did the Lord protect me over my family?", I asked myself, "Why am I safe, when others are suffering today simply for who they are or where they live?" It is a daunting question to ask, and a nearly impossible one to answer. I believe I can use my access to education to spread awareness of human rights issues and the oppression of marginalized groups. I thought of Gabor this month as I led our annual Martin Luther King, Jr. assembly and shared stories of modern-day discrimination and brutality towards women, people of color, and the LGBT community. I also connect her purpose with my own aspirations of becoming a writer, and joining the ranks of brilliant journalists, potent essayists, and stirring novelists who expose the public to human rights violations through their words.

Perhaps it is human nature, as Gabor suggests, to turn away from the inhumane reality that only humans are capable of. But it is also only humans who can consciously choose to confront that reality and change it.