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Katie Burns

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Dr. Sharyn Slavin Miller

### Museums: A Medium for Dialogue

How was this possible? Why didn't anyone stop them? I can't believe that the world turned a blind eye to this. How could this nation allow this to happen? How did people ever justify these actions? These are just a few of the questions that crossed my mind as we walked through the Museum of Tolerance and the Japanese American Museum in Los Angeles, CA. After viewing the horrible conditions that society imposed on so many I felt truly burdened and sorry for the actions of previous generations. I initially felt some comfort in the ungrounded belief that events like the holocaust and internment would not happen today. My comfort, however, was momentary. I was struck with the sudden realization that I was probably fooling myself if I really believed that last statement.

I recognized that both the holocaust and the Japanese American internment were the result of fear. The American people were afraid of further attacks and the loss of more lives after the attack on Pearl Harbor. It was out of this extreme fear that Americans were willing to turn a blind eye and allow innocent Japanese Americans to be stripped of their rights and, in many ways, their dignity. Germany was no different in the 1930s and 1940s; suffering from severe depression and a government in turmoil, Germany's climate was ripe for a leader like Hitler. Hitler capitalized on the instability of the nation and the resulting fear in order to push his own agenda forward. As time passed the people of Germany, and the outside world, became fearful of Hitler and his powerful army. The fear of speaking out against Hitler and his actions facilitated the Nazi's horrendous plan to eradicate the Jewish and other undesirable populations in Europe. In short, it was fear

that produced and enabled the shameful events of the holocaust and the Japanese American internment.

My recognition of fear as the driving force behind these reprehensible actions helped me to understand that events, like the holocaust and internment, are still possible in our society because fear still exists. As long as we are afraid of people that are different than ourselves there is a potential for us to act irrationally and rob someone else of their rights and dignity. Perhaps for me that was the most meaningful message of the two museums. As a society we will never be safe from the danger of repeating history until we learn to love and respect all people; even if those different than ourselves. And even after we learn to love and respect other people we must never forget the tragedies of our past so that we may prevent them from occurring in the future.

The two museums both recount the stories of two different groups who became victims of injustice because people failed to acknowledge the beauty in our differences living in fear instead. The museums serve as a unique launching place for discussions on diversity, tolerance and understanding. The Museum of Tolerance offers viewers an opportunity to face the harsh reality of life for millions of Jews in the 1940's. As museum goers walk through the many galleries, read or hear the accounts of survivors, discover the fate of a young child from the holocaust, and sit in a replica gas chamber history becomes a person who has a name, a face, a family, a story. It is no longer a sad blemish we only read about in our history textbook; it is real. Viewers are forced to remember the events that have forever changed the lives of countless families. Additionally, museum goers must begin to ask questions ethical questions about how an event such as this could

ever possibly happen; in attempting to answer these questions viewers are forced to look into their own lives and find their own biases and fears.

The Museum of Tolerance is home to the “millennium machine” which is a very appropriate way to conclude any visit to the museum. Through the millennium machine museum goers are obliged to look into the own lives and come face to face with the reality of our society and the injustices that are still occurring. It is not enough to simply walk through the Museum of Tolerance and feel sorry for the events of the past one must act on the questions and learning that result from a tour of this museum. A very appropriate first step is simply to analyze our own heart and mind; the millennium machine helps us begin this process. It points out areas in our world where we have turned a blind eye. The hope is that after learning about the injustices in our world viewers will explore what they can do to right the wrongs; or if they are not interested in righting the wrong one must struggle to answer the question why. Why would you not desire to help those that are suffering; not that we should all have bleeding hearts but we need to be sensitive to the needs of our fellow men and women. The Museum of Tolerance, through the use of the millennium machine and many other devices, initiates conversations and self-exploration around issues related directly to diversity.

Like the Museum of Tolerance, the Japanese American Museum functions as a medium for dialogue regarding issues of diversity. The Japanese American Museum is significantly smaller than the Museum of Tolerance, yet it carries its own power. The power of the Japanese American Museum is found in the set up and flow of the museum; which recounts the events leading up to internment, life within internment camps and the fight to rebuild and reestablish life after internment. At the beginning of the main portion

of the museum stands an internment “home” relocated from an internment camp. This home solidifies the reality of the events in the mind of museum goers. The cramped quarters of this building even with only three viewers inside reinforces the loss of dignity and honor that Japanese Americans faced as they were uprooted from their homes and forced to move. The difficulty of life in the internment camps and adjustment back to society is recounted through countless artifacts and firsthand accounts in the museum. History is once again brought to life through the galleries, pictures, artifacts, and stories of Japanese Americans.

Once again a museum viewer is forced to leave the museum asking many questions and searching within their own heart and mind to answer the question; “If I had been there would I have allowed this to happen?” Or “If that happened today would I be willing to speak out against the injustice?” The Japanese American Museum did not force viewers to come face-to-face with the injustices of today’s world but rather left one with the haunting reality that injustice can happen anywhere, including a country founded on providing and protecting the rights of her people. Thought provoking and meaningful musings exit the Japanese American Museum with each viewer that leaves.

The two museums remind us that injustice exists in our society. To drive this reminder home the museums employ the use of artifacts and first accounts from atrocious and appalling historical events. The museums, especially the Japanese American Museum, recount the events leading up to and through the internment and the holocaust. The use of replica gas chambers and internment homes drive home the reminder that people were stripped of the rights and privileges that they had once enjoyed; the rights and privileges that many others were still enjoying despite these groups of people losing

theirs. The overall tone and mood of both museums was somber yet respectful and inviting. Inviting people to come, learn, discover and explore some of the many issues related to diversity. The Museum of Tolerance utilized the life story of children to help further drive home the point that the holocaust was the senseless killing of innocent victims. Additionally, the Museum of Tolerance offered the opportunity to hear the life story of a survivors and allowed viewers to ask questions and build a relationship with someone who lived through the holocaust. While the Japanese American Museum did not offer opportunities for direct connection and relationship with survivors of the event it was no less meaningful and impacting. The museums differed in size and scope but both pursued a common goal and desire to educate. Both sent home the same message; don't forget and don't repeat.

As student affairs professionals it is important that we take this message back to our campuses. It is important that as we interact with students of different backgrounds and different cultures that we help students to learn the value of loving and respecting our neighbors; thereby helping to create a safe and welcoming environment. Like the museums we can employ the help of things and people outside of ourselves to accomplish this goal. The trip to these two museums highlighted two potential ways to raise diversity awareness on my campus. First, would be simply providing a space where students can share their life story, their struggles and their fears. This would be a place in which people of all cultures could learn about each other thereby developing trust, understanding and love. Just as the survivor of the holocaust allowed museum goers the opportunity to connect with history so the life story of students allow for meaningful connections and relationships that foster growth and discovery.

Second, would be to develop a modified version of the millennium machine. In this students would be given the opportunity to get a glimpse at the injustices that still exist in our society today. Just like visitors at the Museum of Tolerance students would be forced to wrestle with their own ideas, biases, conclusions and fears that are often a driving force, or at least an enabling factor, in the injustices around the world. The goal in both these activities is to spark conversation; just like the museums sparked discussion for many individuals. In helping our students become more culturally aware and welcoming we are helping to further the message of the museums; don't forget and don't repeat.