

Reveling in Responsibility - Or, Resisting the Rhinos

Humanities Happy Hour
Intellectual Hors d'oeuvres
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During just the past 60 years:

- The United States government, in the early 1940s, failed to act to save European Jews from annihilation, even to the point of preventing Jews from immigrating to the United States and putting pressure on other nations to restrict the immigration of Jews.
- The United States government, in 1953, overthrew the democratically elected Mohammad Mossadegh in Iran and proceeded to train the Shah's savage Savak secret police – all of which led to the eventual take-over of Iran by militant Muslims who are now intent on building up a nuclear capability and supporting extreme Islamist theocracies in other nations.
- The United States government, in 1954, at the behest of US-based multinational United Fruit Company, overthrew the democratically elected Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in Guatemala, leading to US-friendly, extremely repressive military juntas, who, between 1954 and 1990, according to the estimates of human rights groups, murdered more than 100,000 civilians and tortured countless others;

- The United States government, involved in the Vietnam War since 1959, sent large numbers of American combat troops to Vietnam from 1965 until 1973, when the US finally withdrew, leaving in its wake more than 1.3 million people killed and an unknown number severely injured – only for the war’s chief architect and primary promoter, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, to write in 1995: “We were wrong, terribly wrong.”
- The United States government failed to lift a finger to stop the post-Vietnam War genocide carried out by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia from 1975-1979, resulting in the deaths, many of which followed vicious torture, of some two million men, women, and children, including all but a thousand of 60,000 Buddhist monks in the country.
- The United States government, in the 1980s, sponsored a terrorist campaign against the Nicaraguan people after they overthrew a brutal, totalitarian government that was supported by the United States.
- The United States government rewarded Saddam Hussein the year after his use of chemical weapons in his genocide against Iraqi Kurds by doubling, to \$1 billion, agricultural credits, under the justification expressed by then-Secretary of State James Baker (the man recently tapped by Congress to head the Iraq Study Group), that, in his words, “Had we attempted to isolate Iraq, we would have also isolated American businesses, particularly agricultural interests, from significant commercial opportunities.” In other words, the United States government would not sanction, but reward, Hussein following his use of chemical weapons because it was good for American business.

- The United States government, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, along with Europe and the United Nations, stood by, without taking any action whatsoever, for three and half years, beginning in 1992, while Slobodan Milosevic and his Serb nationalist henchmen, carried out a genocidal campaign against non-Serbs, killing some 200,000 Bosnians and forcing more than 2 million off of their lands. That “ethnic cleansing” campaign included torture and mass rapes, including the utilization of rape camps, while the US government stood by and watched.
- The United States government, and the United Nations, did absolutely nothing during the 100 days from April to July 1994 when a systematic campaign was carried out in Rwanda to kill 800,000 Tutsis and those who objected to the killing, notwithstanding that the UN military commander in Rwanda, Roméo Dallaire, has consistently maintained that a modest increase in troops at the beginning, as he requested, would have stopped the killing.
- The United States government has failed to take effective action to prevent or deter the trafficking in human beings, including the sexual slavery of millions of women and girls, as President Bush applied full sanctions against only three countries of fourteen identified as failing to adequately address extremely serious trafficking problems.
- The United States government, alone among major nations in the industrialized world except Australia, has failed and refused to commit to even minimal reductions in the emissions of global warming pollutants, and has engaged in a massive misinformation campaign in concert with oil companies, which have been enjoying obscene record profits, while the International Panel on Climate Change, in which thousands of scientists from over 100 countries have

participated, and the scientific academies of at least 20 nations, including the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, China, and Japan, as well as the American Meteorological Society, the American Geophysical Union, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, all agree that human activities, including deforestation and the burning of coal, oil, and gas, are causing a dramatic increase in atmospheric greenhouse gases, leading to dangerous, rapidly increasing global temperatures, with disastrous future consequences.

- The United States government, after grotesque lies to the American people and the world at large about non-existent weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (all of which had been destroyed after the first Gulf War) and the non-existent connection between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda, invaded and occupied Iraq, a nation that had nothing whatsoever to do with the 9/11 attacks on the US, at a cost, so far of 3,017 servicemen and servicewomen killed, more than 21,000 US troops severely injured, approximately 655,000 more Iraqis dead than if US troops had not invaded (601,000 of them by violence), and \$360 billion (enough to pay for 4-year scholarships for more than 17 million students in the United States).
- The United States government has kidnapped, disappeared, and imprisoned people without bringing charges against them. It has also tortured and kidnapped people and sent them to other countries to be tortured. Recently, the United States Congress, including our own Congressman Jim Matheson, voted to deny the right of habeas corpus to those who have been kidnapped and imprisoned – the right, guaranteed as a fundamental right ever since the Magna Carta to challenge in the courts the legality of imprisonment or the conditions of confinement.

- The United States government has for four years turned a blind eye to the incredible suffering of millions of people in the Darfur region of Sudan, while more than 200,000 people have been brutally murdered, thousands of women and girls have been raped, and more than 2.5 million people have been run off from their homes.

There is more – but this is supposed to be Humanities Happy Hour, the operative words being “happy” – not infinitely depressing and despairing – and “hour” – not three hours!

Upon a cursory review of that partial history of our government’s crimes against humanity – crimes of omission and of commission – we must each ask ourselves: “Why do we allow this to be done by our government?” And “What can we do – that we are willing to do?”

Look around. Do you hear the stampeding of rhinoceroses? Do you see people turning into rhinoceroses? Are each of us willing to fight against the rhinoceroses – and to resist becoming one of them?

Why do I speak of rhinoceroses? That image has stuck in my head ever since I was a Philosophy student at the University of Utah and I read Eugene Ionesco’s play, *Rhinoceros*.

In *Rhinoceros*, ordinary people began turning into Rhinoceroses, savage animals who reflect the seeming beauty of strength and power. This is, of course, an allegory for the uprising of Nazism and fascism – and for the complacency and cowardice that allowed it to occur. The metamorphosis into a rhinoceros is appealing to just about everyone in the play, including those who one would not have previously expected to be vulnerable. There is Jean, who gives in to becoming a Rhinoceros as he evades his

responsibility to resist. So, too, Daisy, who thinks she can be above it all – that is, who thinks it doesn't involve her and that the changes in the world should just be accepted. Soon, herds of Rhinos are running through the streets. Berenger resists becoming a rhinoceros – demonstrating that his commitment to humanity, his commitment to resistance, renders life its meaning. It is classic existentialism, emphasizing that apathy and inaction in the face of wrongdoing is as dangerous, harmful, and violative of our responsibility as moral actors as active wrong-doing.

This is Berenger, speaking with Jean:

Berenger [speaking to Jean]: Your veins look swollen. They're jutting out.

Jean: It's a sign of virility.

Berenger: Of course it's a sign of health and strength. But . . . [He examines Jean's forearm more closely, until Jean violently withdraws it.]

Jean: What do you think you're doing – scrutinizing me as if I were some strange animal?

Berenger: It's your skin . . .

Jean: What's my skin got to do with you? I don't go on about your skin, do I?

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Berenger: You're breathing very hard.

Jean: One breathes as best one can. You don't like the way I breathe, and I don't like the way you breathe. Your breathing's too

feeble, you can't even hear it; it's as if you were going to drop dead any moment.

Berenger: I know I'm not as strong as you.

[At that point, Jean transforms more and more into a rhinoceros, which shocks Berenger, as he tries to talk Jean into getting help. Jean snorts loudly, then attacks Berenger, who later recounts to Dudard how surprised he was that Jean, so human, such a humanitarian, could have become a rhinoceros. Berenger tells Dudard that he is seeing more and more of the rhinos everywhere.]

Dudard: They don't attack you. If you leave them alone, they just ignore you. You can't say they're spiteful. They've even got a certain natural innocence, a sort of frankness. . . . I think you're right to a certain extent to have some reaction. But you go too far. You've no sense of humour, that's your trouble, none at all. You must learn to be more detached, and try and see the funny side of things.

Berenger: I feel responsible for everything that happens. I feel involved, I just can't be indifferent.

Dudard: Judge not lest ye be judged. If you start worrying about everything that happens you'd never be able to go on living.

Berenger: If only it had happened somewhere else, in some other country, and we'd just read about it in the papers, one could discuss it quietly, examine the question from all points of view and come to an objective conclusion. We could organize debates with professors and writers and lawyers, and blue-stockings and artists and people. And the ordinary man in the street, as well – it would be very interesting and instructive. But when you're involved yourself, when you suddenly find yourself up against the brutal facts you can't help feeling directly concerned – the shock is too

violent for you to stay cool and detached. I'm frankly surprised, I'm very surprised. I can't get over it.

Dudard: Well I'm surprised, too. Or rather I was. Now I'm starting to get used to it. . . . This is the situation and there's nothing you can do about it.

Berenger: That's fatalism.

Dudard: It's common sense. When a thing like this happens there's bound to be a reason for it. That's what we must find out.

Berenger: Well, I don't want to accept the situation.

Dudard: What else can you do? What are your plans?

Berenger: I don't know for the moment. I must think it over. I shall write to the papers; I'll draw up manifestos; I shall apply for an audience with the mayor—or his deputy, if the mayor's too busy [speaking at Humanities Happy Hour].

Dudard: You leave the authorities to act as they think best! I'm not sure if morally you have the right to butt in. . . . Who knows what is evil and what is good? It's just a question of personal preferences. You're worried about your own skin—that's the truth of the matter. But you'll never become a rhinoceros, really you won't . . . you haven't got the vocation!

Berenger: There you are, you see! If our leaders and fellow citizens all think like you, they'll never take any action.

I regret to report that I see rhinos almost everywhere I go, especially these days. People who may have had concerns at times, but who are now "used to it."

When I go to quiet college campuses and see apathetic, detached students more tied into their iPods than into their local, national, and world community, I see rhinoceroses.

When I see legislators voting to deny marriage equality to people on the basis of their sexual orientation, voting to turn 12 million people in our country into felons and to deport them, voting to undermine the freedoms from governmental abuse that historically have set our nation apart from totalitarian regimes – I see rhinoceroses.

When people know more about Brad Pitt's love life and whether Britney Spears is wearing underwear than about more than one million women being forced into sexual slavery each year or about the lies that led our nation into an illegal and astoundingly tragic war, I see rhinoceroses.

I've often wondered who in our culture of obedience would actually resist falling in line with Nazis if this were Germany in the late 1930s and early 40s. Who would resist joining in with the Hutus as they massacred the Tutsis and those who opposed the massacres? Who would resist the call to kill or be killed in a war based upon lies – a war that is only creating more hatred and violence? And who would resist the complacency toward – that is, who would stand up and actively work against – the current genocide in Sudan, the trafficking in human beings, the pollution of our delicate atmosphere that will lead to human rights catastrophes of historic proportions?

Perhaps the most important thing I learned in my studies in the Humanities is that we are all responsible. I learned that we cannot foist our personal responsibility off onto supernatural figures, onto our parents, onto our political or military leaders, onto religious leaders, or onto anyone or anything else. Responsibility stops with each of us.

Saying “I was just following orders” is not a way out of our responsibility. By saying that, we are simply saying, “I chose a certain course of conduct that conformed with what someone else said.” Following orders, simply complying, is still a choice. Perhaps the most important thing I learned, first in my studies at the University and since then through life, is that we always have the power – the choice – to say “No.” No, I won’t slaughter men, women, and children, even if ordered to do so by Lt. William Calley. No, I won’t wiretap people without a warrant, even if ordered to do so by Alberto Gonzales. No I won’t participate in the delivery of prisoners to countries where they will be brutally tortured, even if ordered to do so by Donald Rumsfeld.

To be responsible sounds like such a simple concept. But it is not. And the ramifications are enormous – empowering – and horrifying.

To respond is at the root of our responsibility. Perhaps the most disturbing truth is that there is no way out of our responsibility. As moral actors – as human beings – we cannot ever authentically maintain that we’ll just sit this one out.

The burden of being human – of being responsible – is something to celebrate as life-affirming. We can, and should, even enjoy it – and have some good humor along the way. We are, after all, as responsible for our own happiness and enjoyment of life as for anything. A sense of humor can actually help us better fulfill our responsibilities – and can help us persevere through it all.

Fundamental to our responsibility to act and to speak up is our responsibility to learn about wrongs that can be remedied. Our responsibility does not entail simply acting or refraining from acting if and when we happen to learn about a wrong being perpetrated. We must seek out the knowledge about what is

occurring. To close our eyes so we don't see an injustice being committed – to explain that we don't read newspapers or watch the news because there is too much sad news – is to choose to allow it to continue.

I wish Orrin Hatch had learned about the responsibility to learn. Perhaps then, while serving for so many years in such a powerful office, where he could have taken action that would make a monumental difference, he would have read more about global warming than one work of fiction, a novel by Michael Crichton, which is to the science of climate change what *Jurassic Park* is to the history of dinosaurs.

I wish President Bush had learned about the responsibility to learn. Perhaps then, before choosing to begin a tragic war, he would have been more competent in determining whether, in fact, Iraq actually posed a threat to the United States. Or, after discovering his astounding blunders about weapons of mass destruction, he would have acknowledged the mistakes and stopped prolonging the slaughter and destruction under the guise of one after another new rationale.

As moral actors, we must all do so much better. We must find our voices to say “No” to the status quo. And, as members of the human family, we can all make such an enormous difference. In that power, we can rejoice.

Not to turn this into a shameless plug for the College of Humanities, but because of my gratitude for how my studies in the Humanities made me more conscious of my responsibilities – and, therefore, of my humanness – I am compelled to urge that we help the College of Humanities continue its crucial mission of teaching students to think critically, choose ethically, and honor their responsibilities as moral actors. So much is at stake.

And, in order to get through this serious business of being human, of being responsible, we can nourish and gain nourishment from our wonderful community in so many ways, not least of which is a bit of imbibing and socializing at the Humanities Happy Hour, another in a long line of fine traditions begun by Dean Robert Newman and Tim McGinnis.

[Toast] So, here's to being human, being responsible, and rejoicing in it every chance we get. And watch out for those rhinos!