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The most frightening lesson of all

Why I require FBI agents to visit the Holocaust Museum

by James B. Comey

I believe that the Holocaust is the most significant event in human history. And I mean “significant” in two different ways.

It is, of course, significant because it was the most horrific display in world history of inhumanity, one that simply defies words and challenges meaning. I was born into an Irish Catholic family in this great, wonderful and safe country, but the Holocaust has always haunted me, and it has long stood as a stumbling block to faith.

How could such a thing be? How is that consistent with the concept of a loving God? How is that in any way reconcilable with the notion of a God with a role in human history? How could there possibly be meaning in life, when so many lives were snuffed out in such a fashion?

I have asked those questions since I was a young teenager. I have asked them my entire life. I asked the same questions standing in the pit at Ground Zero in early 2002. I have asked those questions many times as I have confronted unimaginable suffering and loss.

And I know I am in good company asking such questions. Last month, on a flight home from Eastern Europe, I reread Viktor Frankl’s wrenching “[Man’s Search for Meaning](#),” in which he seeks to find meaning in suffering and loving, among other things.

And going much farther back, back before I was a religious studies major in college, I recalled the voice from the whirlwind in the Book of Job, rebuking us for even asking the question “Why?” “How dare you!” the voice seems to say. “It is not for you to ask, it is not for you to know.”

And yet I ask, as so many of us do. And I still don’t know.

But I do know this: I know it is our duty, our obligation, to make sure some good comes from unimaginable bad. Not so we can comfort ourselves by saying, “Oh, that was worth it then.” That’s nonsense. That would be perverse. It will never be “worth it.”

Instead, I believe it is simply our duty to do that, and I believe this is truth no matter where you come from on a philosophical or religious spectrum. Our obligation is to refuse to let bad win, to refuse to let

evil hold the field. As Abraham Lincoln said on a field of unimaginable pain and loss, it is essential “that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.” Our resolution does not justify the loss, but we simply cannot be alive and give up.

There are so many ways to fight evil to ensure it doesn’t hold the field. Some do this through public service that can involve actual physical battles against evil; others by different kinds of service, including the service of teaching a world what happened, teaching a world what is true.

The Holocaust was, as I said, the most horrific display in world history of inhumanity. But it was also the most horrific display in world history of our humanity, of our capacity for evil and for moral surrender.

And that second significance is the reason I require every new FBI special agent and intelligence analyst to go to the Holocaust Museum. Naturally, I want them to learn about abuse of authority on a breathtaking scale. But I want them to confront something more painful and more dangerous: I want them to see humanity and what we are capable of.

I want them to see that, although this slaughter was led by sick and evil people, those sick and evil leaders were joined by, and followed by, people who loved their families, took soup to a sick neighbor, went to church and gave to charity.

Good people helped murder millions. And that’s the most frightening lesson of all — that our very humanity made us capable of, even susceptible to, surrendering our individual moral authority to the group, where it can be hijacked by evil. Of being so cowed by those in power. Of convincing ourselves of nearly anything.

In their minds, the murderers and accomplices of Germany, and Poland, and Hungary, and so many, many other places didn’t do something evil. They convinced themselves it was the right thing to do, the thing they had to do. That’s what people do. And that should truly frighten us.

That is why I send our agents and our analysts to the Holocaust Museum. I want them to stare at us and realize our capacity for rationalization and moral surrender. I want them to walk out of that great museum treasuring the constraint and oversight of divided government, the restriction of the rule of law, the binding of a free and vibrant press. I want them to understand that all of this is necessary as a check on us because of the way we are. We must build it, we must know it and we must nurture it now, so that it can save us later. That is the only path to the responsible exercise of power.

The writer is director of the FBI. This commentary is adapted from a speech given Wednesday at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s 2015 National Tribute Dinner.