



A Single Grain of Rice

March 15th, 2009

I should probably begin by explaining that there is no way, regardless how many words I use or how eloquent I might be, that I could really share with you the full experience that I had yesterday. Be that as it may, I am compelled to attempt this sharing anyway because the importance of the experience is too big to keep to myself.

Yesterday I had the pleasure of speaking as part of an interfaith panel at Pine Creek High School. Although the panel presentation, in itself, contained unique moments worthy of discussion, it is what happened afterward that affected me so deeply.

As one group of students left the room and another began to enter, the teacher who was preparing to teach the next class approached several of us and invited us to stay. She explained that her class has been studying genocide and that she would be providing a very powerful demonstration she felt we would appreciate.

I was a bit intrigued, but my own children, who did not have school today, were waiting at the sitter's for me to pick them up, so I graciously asked if I could stay for a few moments and sat by the door so that I could slide out without disturbing anyone when it was time for me to leave.

I intended to stay for ten minutes or so.

The only other person from the panel who stayed was the Rabbi, a lovely chaplain from the Air Force Academy. He was gracious enough to offer me a closer chair next to him, and, as someone who has come to appreciate any opportunity to get to know folks from other faith traditions more personally, I could not help but accept. It was a very good choice and I am grateful for the Rabbi's gesture because, without it, I might actually have missed something life changing.

The teacher began by laying out several black sheets on the open floor. The students were instructed to sit around them so they would have a better view. In a very matter-of-fact way, she then explained how she and a colleague had wanted to demonstrate the number of people who had been killed by genocide. After a lot of thought, they came up with an idea. They would buy a bag of rice and count how many grains were in a cup, then multiply the cups to get the correct numbers for various incidents throughout history. She explained that each grain of rice represented one human being and she directed our attention to the giant bins that contained what was needed for the exercise.

To begin, each person in attendance was presented with a handful of rice to hold. "What you have in your hand is about as many grains of rice as there are students in this high school (1500)," she

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explained. Then the teacher went to the CD player and introduced a haunting melody.

The music played and she began pouring rice on the ebony canvas.

I wish I had taken note of the exact numbers but the piles quickly became so immense that I could feel myself struggling with my emotions. At that moment, my logical mind was trying to wrap itself around a reality I could hardly comprehend.

"1.5 million." "150,000." "300,000." "7 million." "Hundreds of thousands in only 100 days." The figures were staggering. To actually look at the massive mounds of rice and recognize, in such a visceral way, how many men, women and children had died was almost too much to take in. "Turkey, Germany, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and continuing to this very day in Darfur," she said, as the piles grew and grew. The largest number? Native Americans. "Everything on this sheet - twice!"

My emotions eventually got the better of me. Tears fell freely as I embraced the severity of what she was demonstrating.

I watched as young women with mascara-lined eyes wiped away the darkened streaks that ran down their cheeks. I observed vibrant young men leaning forward, heads resting into their hands, as if to hold back the thoughts that could not be spoken. This was a lesson they would never forget, and neither will I.

Toward the end, the rice we had been holding was collected. "It is believed" she explained, "that, in our lives, we will each have the chance to influence about as many people as you have grains of rice in your hand." We were asked to retain one grain and surrender the rest into a common container.

She paused and asked, "What kind of influence will you be?"

After allowing us a few moments to ponder, she changed the music to something more upbeat. One by one, she brought forth vessels of various sizes and shapes, containing varying amount of rice that represented numbers of individuals who had influenced the world in a positive way. Mother Theresa, - The Survivors of Auschwitz who shared their stories with the world, - The nine Prisoners of War that kept alive the memories of those who had not made it home. There were many examples.

She spoke about how one person could change the world and presented the data necessary to prove her point.

And when she had finished, each student was invited to glue their single grain of rice on a piece of paper and to write what they were feeling.

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Slowly a few students came forward, running their fingers through the piles, and contemplating all that had been seen and heard. As they moved to their desks to write, I quietly placed my grain of rice in my pocket, said a soft goodbye to the Rabbi, and took my leave. I had feelings of my own to sort out and children who were waiting for me.

When I arrived home, I reached into my pocket, afraid I might have lost such a small treasure, and gratefully retrieved that single grain of rice. I placed it in a heart-shaped dish on my altar.

So you see, my friends, I could not simply leave it at that, for I too have some influence in the world. I know that I am blessed to have your ear and, in some cases, your heart, so I must pass along the question that was asked yesterday.

What kind of an influence will you be on the world we share?

Whatever you choose, I hope you will remember how powerful you are and act accordingly.

You are LOVE and you are loved!

Ahriana Platten