

Confessions of a Recovering Bigot

January 30, 2010
Gainesville, Florida

Kenneth D. Wald

Although dictionaries disagree among themselves, I think the opposite of “empathy” is “antipathy,” a term that connotes hostility to something or somebody. I can speak with some insight about that subject because I was raised as a bigot, a person rich in antipathy and altogether lacking in empathy for the object of my hatred. Accordingly, I showed the target of my bigotry no compassion. I want to tell you how I’ve moved away from that condition, to some degree at least, because of the power of reconciliation.

As a child, I learned to hate Germany and all things German. It’s not surprising I developed such antipathy because my parents were German Jews who came of age during the period of Hitler’s rule. As a result of the Nuremberg laws passed by the Nazis, they each lost their homes, their family businesses, their citizenship and, in time, most of the members of their extended families. Despite valiant efforts, my father was unable to get his parents out of Germany and they were in due course deported to Poland and executed for the crime of being Jewish. Little wonder that I was raised to believe that all Germans were Nazis, to root against every German team or athlete, to celebrate the firebombing of Dresden when I read about in school, and to regret, not celebrate, the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989. If I heard about some natural or man-made disaster that took lives in Germany, I could not help but think cruel thoughts about the disaster having a silver lining. Of course, like most bigots, I learned to differentiate in daily between individual Germans who I treated with courtesy and Germans as a people for whom I had nothing but loathing and contempt.

In 2000, I made an unlikely decision to visit Grosrohrsdorf, my father’s home town, the only place that would connect me with my father’s parents—Curt and Regina Schönwald. My visit came to the attention of three men in that town who, unbeknownst to me, had been researching my family. At the urging of the leader of the group, a Lutheran pastor named Norbert Littig, I revisited Grosrohrsdorf and we forged an unlikely partnership dedicated to uncovering the memory of my family in Germany.

Norbert had taken on this task out of a sense of personal responsibility. As a seminary student in East Berlin, he had studied Judaism and was shaken to the core by learning what his country had done to the Jews of Europe. To atone for these sins, Norbert decided to learn Hebrew, to help rebuild the ruined Jewish cemeteries that dotted the German landscape, to take his students to America and Israel where they would meet Jews, and to bring American and Israeli students to the town. In the Jewish tradition, the highest form of charity is when the donor does not know the recipient. Norbert took on the task of restoring my family’s presence long before he met me, in fact long before he knew that there were any living descendants of the Schönwalds.

Norbert planned the climax of his research for November 2008, the month that marked the 70th anniversary of Kristallnacht. During that prolonged race riot, the Nazis brutally attacked Jewish residents, burned down synagogues and vandalized businesses owned by Jews. On Kristallnacht, Curt Schönwald was marched to the Town Hall and sent to Buchenwald concentration camp,

from which he returned, six weeks later, physically shattered. Norbert persuaded the Grosrohrsrdorf town council to convene a weeklong commemoration that would climax with the unveiling of a memorial to the Schönwalds.

During the week, I gave a talk to the townspeople as a representative of the family, telling them that because Grosrohrsrdorf had given us the memories of things we couldn't remember on our own, I considered the books balanced and that the family Schönwald now belonged to them. Curt and Regina were their legacy, their collective responsibility, and they had to decide how best to deal with the memory.

On the following Sunday morning as we sat in Grosröhrsrdorf's parish church and heard Norbert Littig's sermon to his parishioners, I discovered the meaning of empathy. Just a few kilometers outside town, there was an abandoned Soviet-era military base housing Iraqi refugees who had fled the carnage in their country for the safety of Germany. In Iraq, these Christians had been targeted for ethnic cleansing. Until now, Norbert said, the Christians of Grosröhrsrdorf had done little if anything to help the displaced Iraqi Christians, believing that the cultural gap between them was unbridgeable. But if they were to take to heart the lessons of the Schönwald family, he told them, they had to show kindness to the strangers. Effective immediately, he announced, the parish would adopt the camp and set up regular rotations to help feed, clothe and educate their Iraqi cousins. They would take the new residents into their homes for meals, festivals and fellowship. That, he told the hushed congregation, was what collective responsibility meant. That, he said, quoting Scripture, was their Christian duty. That, he said, answering my challenge, was what Grosröhrsrdorf owed the memory of Curt and Regina Schönwald.

Knowing that the legacy was in good hands, I finally understood that I had to let go of my anger before I could appreciate what Norbert had done for me. Antipathy—the root of prejudice—is not a disease that can be cured once for all. It is a condition that may be controlled. As a recovering bigot, I am aware that the condition is still within me and needs little stimulation to emerge. It emerged a few months ago, in fact, when Norbert informed me that somebody had defaced the monument to my grandparents, painting over it with swastikas. However, knowing that Norbert and his family spent hours cleaning the monument, aided by friends and townspeople, gave me the perspective I needed to tamp down the bigot within. When I feel the urge to anger, I simply remind myself that I can't hate a people that includes someone like Norbert Littig, the friends who worked with him to restore my family's history, or those townspeople who shared memories that finally, for the first time in my life, gave me grandparents. It took another man's empathy to allow me to develop my own. May we all be so fortunate.