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**Kathleen B. Jones**

**Reflections on Violence and  
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Hannah Arendt**

**FREIA**

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Paper from

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## **Preface**

The following paper is a key note address presented by Kathleen B. Jones at FREIA's annual conference 2005 – "Power and identities in a globalized world", at Aalborg University, Saturday the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 2005.

Kathleen B. Jones is professor of Women's Studies at San Diego State University.

Birte Siim

**Katleen B. Jones**

## **Reflections on Violence and Gender in an Era of Globalization: A Philosophical Journey with Hannah Arendt**

These remarks are drawn from a work in progress, a book I am writing about the influence of Hannah Arendt's life and work in my own. Tentatively titled *Diving for Pearls: A Thinking Woman's Journey*, this work marks a departure from my more traditional academic work and takes a personal approach to philosophical themes.

The paper I present today is an extended meditation on two excerpts from Hannah Arendt's 1964 essay, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship." These excerpts are:

"There exists in our society widespread fear of judging...[B]ehind the unwillingness to judge lurks the suspicion that no one is a free agent, and hence doubt that anyone is responsible or could be expected to answer for what he has done..."

"...who has ever maintained that by judging a wrong I presuppose that I myself would be incapable of committing it?"

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These quotations form the horizon of my lecture, which aims to mimic the thinking process itself. I will take a journey with Hannah Arendt as my guiding thinker so as to get inside, as it were, the process of thought...

Exactly thirty years ago, Hannah Arendt came to Denmark to receive the Sonning Prize for her contributions to European civilization. The April 1975 ceremony in Copenhagen was, for Arendt, an occasion of great honor and great embarrassment. She was not someone who took public recognition well, perhaps partly because her political writings had made her, more than once, a person for whom recognition bordered on infamy. In her award speech, Arendt alluded to the "conflicting reactions and

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1. *Responsibility and Judgment*, (Schocken Books, 2003), 19.

reflections” with which she was struggling to come to terms ever since she received “the startling news” of having been selected for the prize, and recounted these for her audience. Uncharacteristically, Arendt began “with the purely biographical.”<sup>2</sup>

“It is no small matter to be recognized for a contribution to European civilization for somebody who left Europe thirty-five years ago by no means voluntarily—and then became a citizen of the United States, entirely and consciously voluntarily...I am, as you know, a Jew, femini generis, as you can see, born and educated in Germany, and formed to a great extent by eight long and rather happy years in France. I don’t know what I contributed to European civilization,” she continued, “but I do admit that I clung throughout all these years to this European background in all its details and with great tenacity.” Even though she became an American in the political sense, she confessed that she “had never wished to belong, not even in Germany...”<sup>3</sup>

Because she didn’t want to belong to Europe, except in terms of the language, and couldn’t see exactly what she had contributed to European civilization, she was inclined to refuse the award, but for another conflict with which the award confronted her because it was Danish:

I have always been fascinated by the particular way the Danish people and their government handled and solved the highly explosive problems posed by the Nazi conquest of Europe...This episode of your history offers a highly instructive example of the great power potential inherent in nonviolent action and in resistance to an opponent possessing vastly superior means of violence...[W]hile there were a few countries in Nazi-occupied Europe which succeeded by hook or by crook in saving most of their Jews, I think the Danes were the only ones who dared speak out on the subject to their masters. And the result was that under pressure of public opinion, and threatened neither by armed resistance nor by guerilla tactics, the German officials in the country changed their minds...they were overpowered by...mere words, spoken freely and publicly.<sup>4</sup>

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2. “Prologue,” *Responsibility and Judgment*, 3.

3. *Ibid.* 3-4

In a sense, Arendt was indicating that part of her motivation to accept was the chance it offered her to honor the honorers, to thank them for helping to prevent Jews, like her, from being wiped off the face of the earth. (It is no small irony that the recent news of Danish complicity with the deportation of Jews to Germany and the research of Kirsten Lylloff of the University of Copenhagen about the post- World War II starvation of some 10,000 German children who were refugees in Denmark complicates Arendt's depiction of Danish resistance). Had this been enough to consider, Arendt might have overcome her self-doubt and immediately said "yes" to the prize. But she didn't. She hesitated because, as she told her friend Mary McCarthy, and later the audience in Copenhagen, "by personal temperament and inclination..." she tended to "shy away from the public realm."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this shyness sounded strange, Arendt admitted, to those who had read her books, finding there her "praise, perhaps even glorification, of the public realm...as the proper space of appearances for political speech and action." But, she added,

"[I]n matters of theory and understanding it is not uncommon for outsiders and mere spectators to gain a sharper and deeper insight into the actual meaning of what happens to go on before or around them than would be possible for the actual actors and participants, who are entirely absorbed, as they must be, by the events themselves..."<sup>6</sup>

Arendt said she preferred secrecy and anonymity not only because she was naturally inclined in that direction, but also because her decision to study philosophy, which supported solitude, was reinforced by the "antipublic climate" of the 1920s, the era of her coming of age, which made one run from public recognition because, at the time, it reeked of the inauthenticity of publicity in a mass society that decried all distinctions, except the "radiant power of fame."

The publicity of the prize set off in her what Arendt, somewhat humorously, called a "crisis of identity."<sup>7</sup> Mentioning how worried Socrates was that the gods were up to some trickery when the Delphic

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4. *Ibid.*, 5-6.

5. *Ibid.*, 7-8.

6. *Ibid.*, 8.

7. *Ibid.*, 11.

oracle announced him the wisest of men, Arendt asked, “what could the gods have meant by making you select for public honor somebody like me, who is neither a public figure nor has the ambition to become one.” What was she supposed to understand about this event? The answer she came to was this—the prize was a *persona*, a role the world had invited her to play. Like wearing the Roman mask to which the word *persona* referred, it was a way to appear “in a society where we were not citizens, that is, not equalized by the public space established and reserved for political speech and political acts, but where we are accepted as individuals in our own right...”<sup>8</sup>

It was as if the prize created a moment when Hannah Arendt--Jew, woman, outsider--could appear as an individual in her own right (having civil standing) in a place where she did not belong politically (Denmark), from which she had been both driven out as a Jew and exiled herself, but to which she clung (Europe, the German language), without having to negate any one of these dimensions of who she was (her naked ‘thisness’). Taking the mask the world had offered her, she appeared as if between public and private, between past and future, and said she was honored and thankful for the moment. She accepted the award and opted to remain a “conscious pariah.”

That Arendt took this occasion to talk about herself in public is, I think, instructive. Wearing the persona of honoree, Arendt told her audience personal things about herself without violating her own sense of privacy. And what she revealed was not simply the few biographical facts she recounted, but the fact that she deliberately had shied away from the public realm of action in order to sharpen her insights into what was “the actual meaning of what happen[ed] to go on before or around [her].” What happened around her, the “event” she spent her life’s work trying to understand, was totalitarianism and the extreme terror and violence of the death camps that became its horrifying trademark.

Yet, the fact was, Arendt was not only a spectator; she was also a participant, implicated directly in the events happening around her. Not only had she been arrested in Germany and interred in France and been declared a “stateless person,” she also had been involved actively in the study of Zionism in the late 1920s and early 1930s and defended a non-

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8. *Ibid.*, 13.

nationalist version of Zionism into the 1940s. What then did she mean when she said she had chosen the position of outsider?

In several essays, but most clearly in an essay called “The Jew as Pariah,” Arendt explained what she meant. The pariah was an outcast, someone made so by definition, that is, because of some “unchosen, historically given membership in an outcast group.”<sup>9</sup> The “conscious pariah” *chose* to take up that position, refused to erase herself and insisted “on telling the truth, even to the point of ‘indecent.’”<sup>10</sup> By positioning herself outside of events in which she was also a participant, Arendt became a spectator. By creating a distance between herself as a thinker and herself as she was, she became able to make judgments even about things with which she was intimately connected. It was this “outsider’s” position that allowed her to develop an ethical perspective, which she called, following Kant, thinking with an “enlarged mentality.”

Arendt wrote powerful and disturbing essays about personal and collective responsibility for violence. I think her monumental work on violence is more germane than ever in the world in which we live—a world wracked by fear and terror and violence. And even though Arendt had little to say about the problematics of gender and violence, I consider what she said about personal and collective responsibility especially telling in connection with efforts to make feminist sense of the relationship between gender and violence, by which I mean both the pandemic of violence against women and the equally chilling images that came out of Rwanda, and, most recently, out of Abu Ghraib, images that have forced us to remember that violence can also wear a female face. Or, as the American social critic Barbara Ehrenreich said last year, “Women can do the unthinkable.”<sup>11</sup>

Of course, women can. It shouldn’t have taken Abu Ghraib to remind us of that. But this graphic example provides an occasion not only to consider that, as Ehrenreich put it, only a naïve kind of feminism could continue to see “men as perpetual perpetrators, women as perpetual victims, and make sexual violence against women as the root of all injustice,”<sup>12</sup> but also how *to think* differently about the whole problem of

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9. Bat-Ami Bar On, *The Subject of Violence*, 22.

10. Arendt, “We Refugees,” *Menorah Journal* (1943), 31:77.

11. “What Abu Ghraib Taught Me,” <http://www.altnet.org/story/18740>

12. *Ibid.*

gender and violence. I think Hannah Arendt helps us “think differently” about the subject of violence.

In a series of essays she wrote in the mid-1960s, Arendt aimed to distinguish between personal and collective responsibility. *Personal responsibility* meant responsibility for what one actually did and, in the legal arena, was connected to the question of guilt for one’s misdeeds and crimes. *Collective responsibility* was the responsibility an individual assumed for something he or she did not do, but took on because he or she was a member of a group (a collective), which no voluntary act could dissolve. Or, to put it differently, collective responsibility is “vicarious responsibility for things we have not done...taking upon ourselves the consequence for things we are entirely innocent of...[as] the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves, but among our fellow men.”<sup>13</sup>

Several interesting feminist questions emerge from these distinctions, questions which I pose, but do not fully answer:

- 1) How far should the notion of “collective” or group be stretched? If a racist or sexist or heterosexist system creates a group whose members benefit automatically from the socio-political system so constituted, does that group bear collective responsibility for the damage done in its name? In other words, are men, as a group, responsible for actions against women even if they personally do not participate? Are whites or whatever racial/ethnic group is dominant responsible for racist damage? Heterosexuals for heterosexism?
- 2) How does the fact that patriarchal, racist, and because of some “unchosen, historically given membership in an outcast privilege are matters of national law and not only custom complicate the matter of collective responsibility? Does this implicate (hold collectively responsible) both those who benefit and those who lose in such systems, since both “winners” and “losers” are members of the same national collectivity?

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13. “Collective Responsibility,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, op.cit., 157-8.

- 3) If one can never escape collective responsibility for actions which one did not do, but which were done in one's name, why is the concept of personal responsibility also still important for feminist thought? Collective responsibility connects to the concept of the "privilege" one enjoys simply by virtue of being a member of a privileged group. Does the concept of personal responsibility, which depends upon the activities of thinking and judging, provide the needed distance to question supporting the system that creates the privilege?
  
- 4) And how far goes the concept of collective responsibility get stretched in the context of globalization? Globalization has complicated matters of collective responsibility. The rape of young women by UN soldiers, the torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib (Iraq) in the name of the alliance against Saddam Hussein (of which Denmark is a part), and the subjection of women to the risk of AIDS in South Africa through unprotected sex in the context of inadequate medical care and expensive drug treatment are only three examples of the dilemmas surrounding how wide to cast the net of collective responsibility for different dimensions of the problem of gender and violence.

Hovering in the background of her Copenhagen remarks is Arendt's most controversial "public" work, the one that had caused her perhaps the greatest pain -- *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Considering what she wrote in *Eichmann* will help us approach the question of collective responsibility for violence in ways that will bring the issue closer to home.

In 1960, when Arendt heard that Nazi deportation commander Adolf Eichmann had been arrested in Buenos Aires by Israeli agents she wrote immediately to William Shawn, the editor of *The New Yorker*, to propose herself as a trial correspondent. Shawn, who knew Arendt's reputation for boldness, jumped at the offer and in the early months of 1961 Arendt began planning her trip to Jerusalem. Finally, she wrote in a letter, she would get to see those people in the flesh.

A haunting meditation on morality written about what Arendt saw and read during and after the trial, reading *Eichmann* remains deeply disturbing. Over the report hangs the shadow of Arendt's complicated

judgment which she summarized in the unfortunate phrase, “the banality of evil.”

Despite her opinion that when the Israelis seized Eichmann they acted outside international law, Arendt concluded that the Jerusalem court had jurisdiction and was correct to condemn him. She disagreed with the court’s rationale and in a polemical and high-minded epilogue even had the nerve to tell the judges that justice would have been served better had they addressed the condemned with the words she wrote instead of their own, explaining to Eichmann that because he did not want to share the earth with the Jewish people, no member of the human race would now want to share it with him. But the most disturbing, scandalous conclusions she reached were about Eichmann himself.

Eichmann, Hannah Arendt said, seemed to be more a clown than a monster. He wasn’t evil, he was “thoughtless,” unable to reflect on the fact that what he was doing was wrong. Someone once suggested to him, Why not join the S.S, to which he replied, Why not? As if he believed he were a “leaf in the whirlwind of time,” Eichmann became unable to distinguish between sending people to their deaths and doing his job. And the real trouble wasn’t Eichmann but how many others were like him--terrifying normal, their evil banal. What had happened, she wondered, to make so many people like him?

Arendt thought she already had answered that question in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a book she’d written a decade before *Eichmann*. But confronting Eichmann in the flesh changed her answer. Listening both to his testimony and the witnesses called by the prosecution, Arendt became convinced that “extermination would not have come to an end when no Jew was left to be killed” because killing itself was the point of the matter. Far too many people were unable to think that the practice of evil became ordinary. “From the accumulated evidence one can only conclude that conscience as such had apparently got lost in Germany.”

Arendt pulled no punches. She judged even members of the Jewish Council responsible, citing records documenting how Jewish officials cooperated with the Nazis by providing lists of those to be deported. “Without Jewish help in administration and police work...there would have been either complete chaos or an impossibly severe drain on German manpower...To a Jew this role of the Jewish leaders in the

destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story.”

The banality of evil? Jews guilty? The darkest chapter? These ideas were preposterous, many concluded. She may be Jewish, her critics said, but she certainly was soulless; perhaps she was one of those self-hating anti-Semites. The year *Eichmann* was published the Anti-Defamation League sent out a circular to all rabbis to preach against her on Rosh Hashannah. To this Hannah Arendt responded in a letter to her friend, the author Mary McCarthy, “What a risky business to tell the truth on a factual level without theoretical and scholarly embroidery.” The why had she taken the risk? And what had it cost her?

The fallout from *Eichmann* continued for years and during most of it Hannah Arendt remained silent, waiting years to write an essay, “Truth and Politics,” in which, obliquely, she responded to her attackers. Yet, she wrote in another letter to Mary McCarthy, though critics’ barbs wounded her, she thought writing *Eichmann* had been curiously cathartic; writing it cured her of emotional attachments she thought had clouded her judgment of her own past.

When I read that letter to McCarthy I wondered what Arendt could have meant by saying that writing *Eichmann* made her feel “light-hearted.” What emotions had she thought clouded her judgment? And did she really believe she’d discarded those ghostly attachments? At the time, I didn’t want to believe her. I’m not sure I want to believe her now. And yet, I’ve come to think *Eichmann* carries much significance for understanding questions of personal and collective responsibility for violence in our dark times.

Arendt wrote *Eichmann* through what she described in another context as a “fearful imagination,”<sup>14</sup> it was as if Arendt brought herself face to face with a test case of her own earlier, more theoretical arguments. And she allowed the event to force her to abandon any simple way to think herself *out* of the situation. Arendt took what was perhaps too close to her and put it at a distance, at the same time as she brought what seemed remote from her closer. And to explain why I think this is important and why I think it is so powerful a way past the dichotomies about gender and

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14. “The Concentration Camps,” *Partisan Review*, (1948), 15: 746.

violence that Barbara Ehrenreich called naive, I have to tell you a more personal story.

For a long time I wanted to write a book about Hannah Arendt and, in 1994, when the chance came along in the middle of my life, I grabbed it. It never occurred to me I was about to embark on a strange journey. In those days, I thought I had all the tools I needed. I understood the methods of historical and textual analysis and with my mind's eye read Arendt's books and the essential Arendtian commentary. But that eye can be a deceiver, blind to the surfaces, probing only for depth.

I moved across *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind* and taking in the collections of essays—*Between Past and Future*, *On Violence*, *Men in Dark Times*—I lost myself in thinking about Hannah Arendt. For no apparent reason, I saved *Eichmann in Jerusalem* for last.

I was reading *Eichmann* in October when my father took a turn for the worse. He'd been battling colon cancer for five years. Now he was dying, ending my daughterhood and losing that, perhaps even more than losing him, made me deeply afraid.

A punctilious, judgmental man with a drinker's obsession, he lived in Brooklyn his whole life, largely absent from mine, looming in it. As a young man he played trumpet and took me with him every Sunday to the Knights of Columbus Hall to watch the marching band until my mother's impatience with unsurprising rhythms frustrated his hobby and our outings. Except for the occasional trip to Manhattan to see the model train show I don't remember Dad and I doing anything special again until after my parents divorced and on his weekly visits we went to the movies.

My erratic, high-heeled, sexy mother was a gambling kind of drinker and wouldn't settle for the predictability of a John Phillip Sousa when she could have the velvet-tongue of a Mel Torme or the twangy seduction of a Hank Williams. Mom was a sucker for melodrama, for movies where Jimmy Cagney played the repentant mobster or Susan Hayward, another redhead, shouted "I don't need you, I don't want you, you go find some scared little girl and tell her what a big, brave man you are." Dad took pleasure retreating from such histrionics into his model car collection or lining up the family shoes in the kitchen on Saturday and polishing them

for hours. We had the best-shined shoes in Mill Basin. Their marriage lasted ten years until I was nine and the attraction to out-doing each other's bad habits approached lethal.

Drinking was the one real thing my parents had in common and over time it became a kind of binding anti-bond, something that kept them together in their apartness. When they drank, they fought more, and more violently. On the surface, their fights were about money and sex and, in the early days, about having to live with my grandparents. But drunkenness glossed a deeper fury each must have felt at being tied to the other, bound to have and to hold forever the one person least likely to last.

For the first seven years of my life my parents and I lived together with my maternal grandparents in a brick house in Mill Basin. The arrangement ended when grandparents decided they wanted their own apartment and my parents couldn't afford the house on their own. After Dad left, Mom and I stayed in the apartment the three of us had moved to. That's when Mom started dating the policeman whose wife hung around our block one day waiting for my mother to get home from work just so she could call her 'whore' to her face.

"Do you know what your mother is, little girl?" she asked me one day as I walked home from fourth grade in my Mary Queen of Heaven school uniform.

"Of course," I said, attempting to cut her off at the pass, "she's an operator at the Telephone Company."

"I don't mean what she does for a living. I mean what she *is*. She's a whore. She's a thief. She's trying to steal my husband and my little girl's Daddy. Would you like that, little girl? Would you like it if someone was trying to steal your Daddy?"

"My Daddy doesn't live here anymore," I said, expecting a shard, the tiniest crumb of sympathy.

"It's no wonder. With a whore like your mother for a wife. He must have been too ashamed to stay."

At the time, I didn't know what a whore was but it didn't matter because I didn't care what she called my mother. I just wanted her not to stand outside my apartment when I walked home from school and embarrass me in front of my new friends. My new friends were Jewish. Their

mothers played Mahjong and cooked potato latkes and noodle kugel with real raisins and cinnamon and one day would invite me, I could just tell, to their daughters' Bat Mitzvahs. It was embarrassing enough to be the lone Catholic in a Jewish neighborhood. I didn't need any loud-mouthed Italian woman standing with her snotty kid on my sidewalk interfering with my getting into the house fast so I could lose the uniform.

What I had figured out already was how to play on sympathy. How early I learned that if you were good enough at the sympathy game, you could turn the tables and pretty soon people who complained about something you'd done would feel sorrier for you than they did for themselves.

What sources, I wonder, did I consult in my self-education? Most certainly, *The Lives of the Saints*, those martyred aficionados of the sympathy game. The nuns told us to look to them for our models. But of what? With so many arrows and spikes and crowns of thorns circumscribing every delicate part of the body, what else was I supposed to think besides putting the greater glorification of self-abjection in the service of personal fame.

Or maybe it was just all those Cagney movies I watched with Mom, the ones where some lousy rat of thief and murderer turns cowardly as he confronts the electric chair in the penultimate scene. You could feel the audience's sympathy rising because, after all, he is the hero and what's a little mayhem among friends.

Such were the central texts in my youthful moral education. Years later, after I'd studied chapter and verse from most of the world's major religions, I found nothing much new in any one of them. If you wanted dogma, the rules of engagement for the sympathy game, every system seemed to foreground the same thing—do this and this to win salvation, to get a better job, to find love, to save your marriage, your kids, the whole damned planet. Do this and you can forget about thinking.

The Italian woman kept vigil and so Mom and I moved across Flatlands and into the bog of Canarsie, where we lived until I started high school and we rented a larger second floor apartment in a rambling Victorian in Crown Heights. We stayed there for two years until Mom married Jim and we moved back to Mill Basin and I lived with them until college and, after freshman year, married John. Meanwhile Dad met Caroline and made a new family with her and her children and for the next forty

years lived in the tiny Shore Parkway apartment I occasionally visited where he was now dying.

Such memories as these surfaced as I thought about Brooklyn. At the time it seemed to me perfectly ordinary that they did. After all, I told myself, I was going to visit my dying father. It was natural that the past, long sedimented, bubble up. The night I arrived at Dad's apartment I jotted down a few notes and didn't look at them again until many years later, when I started to think about *Eichmann* and remembered Arendt's strange statement that what she had written allowed her to let go of her past. At the time, I couldn't have imagined letting go to be possible. I was too busily devoted to dredging the past up, lock, stock and barrel, looking for any excuse, any reason at all to blame the artifacts for how awful they looked behind the exhibition glass in the museum.

My father and I had a difficult relationship. At least that's what I thought for most of my life. As to what he thought, he never told me directly. And because he was the parent who left, he had the benefit of absence and a brand new family to make the power of his silence and my belief in his wisdom grow out of proportion. For many years after he left, I asked him more or less the same question. Why did that happen, Dad? Why did you leave? But the real question was—don't you still love me?

As I grew older, I devised more clever ways to test him. One Sunday, I waited until the last minute to take the bus from my end of Brooklyn to his, knowing I'd be at least an hour late for dinner. I thought that if he was at the door laughing and pointing to his watch, I was golden. But if he said nothing for an hour or more, I'd crossed the line and at exactly the right moment would admit my mistake *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*, accept penance, genuflect and be returned to the fold. But when he opened the door all he said was how happy he was to see my son wearing that blue sweater Caroline made him and didn't Jed want to go out for a ride on his new brand new red Schwinn bike.

Years later, when I was in graduate school, I regaled Dad with quotations from Marx, convinced that the right turn of phrase would demonstrate my evident wisdom and uncanny ability, given that I'd grown up in a household without books, to have mastered some of the most difficult works of Western philosophy. He was impressed; you could just tell. But somehow I was certain that none of that mattered and devised the

greatest test of all and asked my father to testify on my behalf in the battle with my first husband for custody of our son, Jed.

Dad appeared every day for a week and when his turn came he took the stand and swore on a stack of bibles that his grandson Jed was better off living with me, his mother, and my boyfriend Mike than being moved and that, yes, he got to see him frequently enough, and, no, he didn't see anything wrong with the relationship his daughter had with Mike or with how Mike treated Jed. By keeping what he really thought about Mike to himself I kept my son. But the truly amazing thing is that I didn't see then what he had done.

Only once, when we were arguing about politics and I mentioned Mike, did Dad break his silence on the subject. It was several years after the custody battle and I'd moved to Kentucky and married Mike.

"That lousy bastard thinks he's so smart, but he doesn't know a thing, he isn't worth even one hair on Caroline's head," he said, shaking his fist in my face. He'd never hit me as a child, but it felt like he wanted to now.

"Edward, calm down," Caroline said. "It's not Kathleen's fault."

"He thinks he's too good for us. Where is he today? Again in the library? He makes me sick. He's too good for us to come here? Well, we don't need him. Even when he's here all he does is sit in the corner and sulk."

"He's depressed, Dad," I said. "It's depression, not arrogance."

"He's a lazy Jew bastard, not worth a hair on my wife's head."

To use an American cultural metaphor for bigotry, my father would have made Archie Bunker look mild. Whenever I visited I steeled myself for the usual litany of racial slurs and commentary about lazy Blacks and sloppy Russians dirtying the neighborhood. And, of course, of course, the Jews. But the strange thing about my father was his heart wasn't in it. When it came down to someone in particular, he recurred to the person. In the face of the individual he sacrificed the slur.

He didn't do it in some facile liberal way, as in "some of my best friends are...(fill in the minority blank)". Dad was no liberal. Instead, he described the person in a story with fullness and grace, stressing in particular any acts of kindness performed.

But he couldn't go there in Mike's case.

"Dirty bastard," he mumbled again and went back to his beer. I rose from the table and left the apartment. But in that half-conscious way you feel a

troubling thought emerge in a far corner of your brain, I suspect I knew why my father was furious.

Only much later did I see it wasn't Mike's being Jewish or even the fact that after we'd married I converted to Judaism myself. "Well, at least there'll be some religion in the home," my father quipped when I told him. Besides, he couldn't protest too much; he'd abandoned Catholicism for his wife's Lutheran beliefs, though, he was quick to point out, *that* switch wasn't as loaded as mine. No, what provoked his rage was that courtroom. It had challenged my father's sense of morality a little too close to the bone and deprived him of the occasion to say what he really thought. He had to stand in court and swear that everything was fine and we were so caught up in our own righteousness we didn't stop even once stop to ask how the whole process made him feel.

In those days I thought that one needed only the right logic and a few hardy facts to reach the correct conclusions about the egalitarian parameters of human dignity and mutual respect. I dismissed my father's inability to forget the category and see Mike as a person as one of Dad's many unacknowledged contradictions. Worse still, I considered my father thoughtless.

There was such smugness in my judgment of him at the time because, of course, it hinged on my belief that I displayed no such moral weakness myself. It would be a long time before I tested my own prejudices and confronted the difficult questions Arendt raised in *Eichmann*. "Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or attract attention, regardless of results and specific contents, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually 'condition' them against it?" It would be a long time before I separated thinking from ideology.

But now my father was dying and I went to Brooklyn swimming in memories. One late afternoon I sat vigil at my father's deathbed, watching his eyes flutter open then close. I was thinking about all the time and distance between us. He turned toward me and asked, as easily as if he were asking for a sip of water, if I would change his bedclothes. I stood up and put my arm around his back, raising him enough to take off his pajama shirt. It occurred to me he must have done the same for me when I was a child. Removing his thin cloth pants, I slid my arm

underneath his knees to lift his bony legs high, as I had done to my sons when they were small, and took the soiled diaper from below his buttocks, replacing it with a clean one, gently closing the top of it over his pelvis, sealing its edges above his fragile hips. His hips formed a perfect frame around his hollowed belly so that the whole of his lower torso took on the appearance of a porcelain bowl, transforming the tumor protruding from his center into a pale pear, as if it were some calcified delicacy encased in my father's translucent skin. As to the rest, I pretended to see nothing. Not the penis, not the grayed groin hair, not the feces, not the urine stained clothes.

At that moment I began to feel the father let his daughter go and as he let her go she let her anger at him for being the father who left and her anger at herself for being the never-good-enough daughter join and surface in the room and the father took it into his delirium describing snapshots from his youth he saw projected on the wall in front of him and for some moments he became a child again, made the eldest by the unexpected death of his older brother, watching his own father working the Brooklyn docks and there, there, look, they were carrying sides of meat onto trucks and it was good stuff didn't you want some and I said sure because when the father parted company with the man I was only Kathy watching Edward Jones dying in the bed.

I let Edward go and buried him and thought I put my daughterhood to rest. I stopped reading *Eichmann*. Except daughterhood isn't so easily put to rest. Neither is *Eichmann*.

A month after my father's death, a student of mine was murdered by her boyfriend. She had been a strong woman, a self-defense instructor, director of the campus women's center. They'd met at the gym in the community college where they both had been students before moving to San Diego. He dropped out of school soon after they arrived. They had a difficult relationship. She wasn't afraid. Sometimes when they fought, her friends said, they pushed each other around. He began to do drugs; she figured she'd straighten him out and approached it like any other project. She told him to get his act together, tried humiliating him with his own failures. Then she threatened to leave. A few weeks later, after a crack binge, he strangled her and tried to make it look like someone else did it. He confessed a week after he was arrested.

That summer, when the trial began, I picked up *Eichmann* again. “It would have been so much more comforting to believe Eichmann was a monster.” What did Arendt mean by that? I wondered. Was I looking for a monster?

One day the killer took a seat in the witness stand. I remember thinking how handsome he was. Raising his large hands to form a circle in the empty air in front of him he described how he put his hands around his girlfriend’s throat and then repeated the action. Had he remembered she’d said something? Oh, yes; she had. He remembered. “You’re hurting me.” That’s what she had said.

I tried hard but still couldn’t see any monster. Instead images of things I’d read about or remembered from my own life floated before me. And I suddenly felt I had once been at the scene of a crime, witnessed atrocities, helped hide evidence, and otherwise acted normal. Because I, too, had once been a victim of violence and had lived to tell the story, I understood why I wanted the monsters. What a consolation they were; what a simple, elegant way not to see how easily anyone can overcome the repugnance to do something awful.

Maybe we corral the familiar because it’s all we really know. But I’ve come to think that knowing is not enough and that’s a strange place for an intellectual to be. It means having to throw out all the formulae and comforting slogans and try all over again to figure out how, as Arendt used to say, to think what you are doing without a banister to guide you.

When I was a child I used to play a game. I’d lie down in the middle of the living room rug and stare at the ceiling. As I stared I felt my perspective shifting, the world turning upside down and me floating, suspended, above everything. Below me everything was empty and quiet. That’s how it felt reading *Eichmann* after my father died, after the student was murdered, and memories of childhood and its reiterations surfaced. The world turned upside down and became empty and quiet. I was losing sight of the monsters and beginning to see how much harder it was living without them.

At the end of the murder trial, the jury convicted the young man in the death of my student. One October night two months later he hanged himself in prison and left a note for his attorney. *Tell my mother I loved*

*her; tell her I'm sorry.* Perhaps, I thought, he had become a monster to himself.

Everything looked different when I finished *Eichmann*. I began to sense what Hannah Arendt might have meant by feeling light-hearted. It wasn't gaiety but a lightness, a kind of roominess of heart felt at the moment of releasing the demons. Still I wasn't certain she'd been completely honest. Because in place of the monsters I had a feeling she'd put something more frightening. By banishing the monsters she'd brought back into the world the strange, monstrous burden of freedom.

What I got from *Eichmann* was Arendt's refusal to accept righteousness as anyone's prerogative and this has been perhaps the most difficult lesson to learn. For many years, I believed it self-evident why one must feel indignant at the sight of injustice and aligned myself, rather cavalierly and arrogantly, on the side of the struggle against it. I thought the moral response to condemn all social and political iniquities committed against life's hapless victims in the name of justice was autonomic. I discovered how to play an advanced form of the sympathy game. What I hadn't counted on was learning that perhaps I wound up on the moral side more by accident than self-conscious design.

All the ruminations triggered by reading *Eichmann* at this time in my life had brought me to this—I could have been *Eichmann*. I thought this not because I saw parallels between my life and his, indicating shared causal factors that could be used to predict which humans will do awful, even horrific, things to which others. No, it was the absence of parallels, the uniquely ordinary tale Arendt wove out of the facts of Eichmann's life that got me to think and I began to see I could no longer be certain I'd know what the right thing to do was and just do it.

Believe me, I tried to find an easier exit from this story. At first, I thought, of course, I never would have perpetrated such atrocities. Then I found myself wishing that if I had lived in the 1930s and 40s, I would have been Danish or maybe Italian. But if I absolutely had to be German, then, angel of mercy, let me have been Sergeant Anton Schmidt.

Schmidt had been in charge of a German patrol in Poland and his job was to collect stray soldiers and return them to their units. In the course of his regular duties he befriended members of the Jewish underground and,

without any financial motive, began supplying forged papers and trucks in which Jews escaped. For five months he persisted, until he was arrested and executed in 1942. I wanted to believe I'd have been Anton Schmidt. But, the thing is, I couldn't be sure.

I couldn't be sure that if they asked me for the names of neighbors, I wouldn't cooperate to protect my job, my family, myself, or if they asked me to prove my Aryan descent I wouldn't get out the appropriate pedigree. There was no certainty I wouldn't have acted like the other women soldiers in Abu Ghraib. And even if they invited me to head a project that would ensure the greater glory of nation and bring honor to the highest powers that I wouldn't have advanced to the highest level of the sympathy game and say I'd done it because after so many disappointments in a vale of misfortune I finally got the chance to do something I was called on to do and therefore was not guilty in the sense of the indictment.

*There are so many like Eichmann* who exist not because of where or of whom they were born or because of what gods they worship or some other predictable circumstance or observable cultural pattern and certainly not because there's a little Eichmann in everyone. They exist because the world has changed all around us and we haven't been paying attention.

There are too many people not thinking, too many not telling Anton Schmidt and Zindel Grynszpan and Miriam Akavia and Charlotte Delbo and Monique Mujawamariya and Meena and all aunt Hagar's other children's stories. Because without thought and without story, how can we even hope to defeat the man in the glass booth?

Hope lies behind that question and the answer stares me right in the face. After the monsters are gone, only you and I are left.

I don't know about you, but that makes me feel light-hearted.

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