

A Single Spark

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11-12th Grade Category, Third Place**

“Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them...You can exist without your soul, you know, as long as your brain and heart are still working. But you'll have no sense of self anymore, no memory, no...anything. There's no chance at all of recovery. You'll just - exist. As an empty shell. And your soul is gone forever – lost.”

- *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, by J.K. Rowling

It exists in every person, a tiny spark, the representation of a spirit that lives inside each one of us, our passions, our hopes, and our dreams. This spark grows and develops through our lifelong education, each of our vast and varied experiences that define the person we have grown to be. But this fire is not necessarily eternal; it can dim, and even die when we no longer have the opportunity to ask questions, experience emotions, and appreciate beauty. Throughout history and still today, there are many groups and peoples who have attempted to extinguish this spark that lives inside each one of us, determined to not only kill the physical shells that walk the earth, but also the spiritual beings that truly represent our individuality. Thus far, these dementors have not succeeded. During the Holocaust, the Nazis stopped the hearts of twelve million people and the world stood and watched. Because of strong individuals such as Friedl Dicker Brandeis, however, the spark existing inside millions more lived on.

During the Holocaust, the men, women, and children subjected to the horrors of the Nazis were not only deprived of adequate food, shelter, and sanitary living conditions, but also education, of any glimpse of the world beyond the wooden barracks, of any way to grow and develop in mind and spirit. Friedl Dicker Brandeis was an Austrian art teacher ordered to the Terezin Ghetto in 1942. There she set up an underground art program, encouraging the hundreds of children who lived on the verge of hopelessness to look beyond the horrors of their present situation, helping them to remember their pasts and dream of their futures. In their one tiny escape from their reality of life, the kids drew pictures on cardboard boxes, composed poems, and produced plays. Brandeis's work was the foundation of modern “art therapy,” teaching the children to keep their spirits alive even while their bodies fell victim to hunger and disease. On October 6, 1944, the Terezin Ghetto was liquidated and Brandeis was

packed into a cattle car and deported to Aushwitz. She later died in Birkenau, along with many of her former students (Lane).

While only a few of Friedl Dicker Brandeis's children survived the Holocaust, the spirits of many live on. Before leaving for Aushwitz, Brandeis packed two suitcases with over four thousand of the children's drawings and poems and hid them in the Terezin Ghetto. The suitcases were found when the ghetto was liberated after the end of the Nazi occupation and the works were published in the book *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* in 1959 (Jessop). Friedl Dicker Brandeis did not survive the Holocaust, but her spirit of bravery and determination in the face of the most dire of circumstances exists still today, reincarnated in the artworks of her students.

Dementors, the horrible creatures that have the potential to extinguish the flame that lives inside every person, roamed freely through the death camps of the Holocaust. As the world looks back to these terrible years, we collectively promise ourselves that it will never happen again, that the events in Europe from 1940 to 1944 are a part of history, nothing more than a lesson to be learned. But then we look back again. Twenty million Chinese farmers starved during the Great Leap Forward in the early 1960s, and nobody came rushing to their aid. Ten years later, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution claimed the lives of 400,000 more Chinese civilians and everybody else sat on their living room couch and watched the news unfold. One million human beings lost their lives during the Rwandan genocide, and we thought that would be the end. Still more die in Darfur, Sudan, every day because, although homo sapiens have been evolving into a more complex species for the last one million years, we still haven't figured out how to respect each other. In 1997, two kids brought guns to school, crushing the dreams of twelve Colorado schoolmates. A few weeks later it happened again.

Moral courage is the willingness to work to protect the spark that not only lives inside ourselves, but inside others as well. Although dementors plagued Europe during the Holocaust, their influence clearly is not extinct in the world today. We encounter these horrible creatures every day: people, situations, beliefs, and ideas that work to deaden the spark of humanity. Each day, we have the option to choose, like Friedl Dicker Brandeis, to educate others, to be a tiny ray of hope to the world, and to feed the fire that lives inside every human being. One person may not have been responsible for the Holocaust, the Cultural Revolution, or the genocide taking place in Sudan today, but we are each responsible for putting an end to the tiny dementors we see as we go about

our daily lives: the racial slur, the insensitive comment, or the insulting caricature. Tragedies such as the Holocaust start with something small, a seemingly harmless idea that extinguishes the spark inside one person, and ends the lives of millions more. Equally small actions that fight for the continuation of light in the world, however, have just as much power, and it is the mass sum of these tiny efforts that truly has the potential to make progress in the world.

Bibliography

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