

Elisabeth Baird

California Museum's Dreamers Challenge

### Harijan

In ancient India a rigid four part caste system was developed placing people in categories based on birth. Over time a fifth category was developed for the lowest of the low. They were called Dalit -the untouchables. When we hear about India and this caste system often the first thing we think is "but that is horrible! Why don't we change that?", or "how back ward, that is what makes it a third world country." What we fail to see however, in making this assumption, is the fact that each society has its own caste system, however well hidden it may appear.

In India, when someone of a higher caste passes an untouchable they are taught to ritually cleanse themselves, so dirty is the experience. In the larger parts of India, people are seen languishing in the street alleys, gutters, sidewalks. They are diseased, maimed, without any hope of help. Their level in the caste dictates that they are not worthy of human care based on misdeeds in a previous life. Often the bodies will remain there until death has surely come upon them. It is a terrible image to dwell upon and for the most part people do not. Elie Wiesel spoke with passion when he said: "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference." A holocaust survivor, he knew well the power of human intervention towards a people bereft of human dignity and care. I believe his words were especially meant for the average citizens of countries where atrocities were and are committed. A large scale atrocity cannot be committed without the consent of the people. The holocaust could not have happened had the everyday citizen been aware of what was going on in their own backyards. Indifference reigned. Likewise the Holocaust would have continued had the everyday

citizen not woken up and cried out against the vulgarity of the actions being committed against so many millions.

In our very own society such indifference is more common than we may first suppose. How often do we see homeless people on the street and with almost animosity think, “they did this to themselves, we do not need to help them.”? Usually it is simply more comfortable to ignore them all together. But how can we stare past the suffering of our people? They are human beings with needs and wants just like us. Each has their own story of how they arrived there, and no two narratives are the same. Like the Indians, our own less visible caste system has lent us the views that those without work or a home or an education are somehow lower than us. We can choose to believe this, like so many before us have and so many after us will. Or we can break the cycle. The most primary human need is love. We each are capable of providing this to untold thousands throughout our life time. It doesn't require a degree or large pay check. The simple cost is what humans can be most afraid to share -the vulnerability that comes with dropping our walls of indifference to reach out and love.

How will I reach? I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to attend a high school and be raised in a family where human rights are a common concern, to be addressed and dealt with. Growing up it was not uncommon for family activities or weekends to consist of various service projects, whether it was a trash pickup, or delivering help to someone who was silently struggling. I have learned through experience that the best thing one can give is a smile and some time for the individual in need.

My high school has also provided me with many opportunities for growth. In 10<sup>th</sup> grade with the support of some friends I started The World Religions Club. The primary goal of this

club is to promote tolerance and understanding in our community of the various belief systems that are central to the lives of the Earth's people. This year, with the help of my club and the school leadership, I am working to put on a Hunger Banquet. This is a fundraising event designed to raise awareness about global poverty and wealth inequality. We hope to be able to donate 100% of the funds raised to organizations such as The Kopila Valley children's home in Nepal, (which provides orphaned street children with a sense of security and educational opportunities ) International Sanctuary (which works to stop human trafficking), and a local philanthropic organization.

Next year I will begin college, but I do not want my educational opportunities to remain solely in a class room. During the school year I would like to take courses on sociology, agriculture, foreign affairs, and continue on with religious studies. However on my off semesters and vacation periods, I want to work with volunteer programs such as iSPiice (Integrated Social Programs in Indian Child Education), Kopila Valley children's home, or the Peace Core. My dream is to use the education I gain inside and out of the classroom, to touch the lives of those commonly looked over by the rest of the world. I want to use the knowledge I have to educate these "lowest" of the low. Enabling them with the resources needed to flourish, with better farming techniques, and education opportunities. Every human being is worthy of our time, and the love we have to share. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. best articulates the feelings of my heart when he said: *"I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits"*.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Mohandas Gandhi gave the untouchables a new name: Harijan, meaning children of God. There have been many who have come before me that have worked to

stop social injustice, or as Elie Wiesel would put it, indifference. There will be many still after me who will work for the same thing. But in between there is a place for me to rise up and create change. That place is now. I will work to break this cycle of indifference. No one is untouchable.

## Works Cited

1. Young, William A. The World's Religions: Worldviews and Contemporary Issues Third Edition. New Jersey: Prentice Hall

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- Entry title: Harijan
- Name: Elisabeth Baird
- School: Orange County High School of the Arts
- School address: 1010 North Main Street, Santa Ana, CA. 92701
- School Phone: (714) 560-0900
- Name of supervising teacher: Camie Velin

Personal Statement: Mohandas Gandhi said, “You must be the change you want to see in the world.” When I look at our world, the changes I most want to see are those involving human inequality. We are all part of the human family; I will not neglect my brothers and sisters.