



Brendan Cox at The Anne Frank Annual Launch to mark Holocaust Memorial Day 2017

Thank you for inviting me to speak today, it's a huge honour to talk to all of you and to be part of keeping Anne Frank's memory alive.

You all know her story and I would hazard a guess that a majority of British people know her name and the basics of what happened.

Thanks to the work of the Anne Frank Trust and others, her story has been immortalised.

In the past I think we have looked on her tragedy as a historical abomination, a horror from a bygone age, almost a museum curiosity of man's inhumanity to man.

I certainly did.

I saw her story as something to be memorialised, to be honoured but not a source of insight or warning for the future.

I see it differently now; a story of how a society can go so quickly from normality to barbarity.

Jo and I worked in civil wars and conflicts for many years. In the early years of our relationship before we had our own kids we would go to Bosnia and Croatia every summer and Christmas to play with and look after children who had lost their parents to hatred, particularly survivors from Srebrenica.

Professionally, when we worked at Oxfam together, we spent time in Rwanda, Darfur, Cambodia and other countries brutalised by internal conflict and genocide.

Four years ago Jo and I visited Auschwitz for the first time.

We had been in Poland climbing mountains together and wanted to go to understand better what man at its worst was capable of. We spent a day there, seeking to comprehend how something like this had come about. Trying to gain some insight into the sociology and psychology of the Holocaust.

What all of those conflicts, genocides and atrocities have in common is not how they were conducted, the plan or the individuals - it was how they started.

They didn't start with tanks, machetes, snipers or killing fields.

They started with prejudice, that prejudice turned into hatred, that hatred was fuelled with anger, that anger was turned into violence and in each of those countries, that violence became systematic, large scale and organised.

For the last year and half I have been studying the rise of xenophobia and hatred across Europe.

Long before hatred and fascism scarred my own family, Jo and I were worried about what was happening to tolerance in our world.

Our fears grew after seeing Europe's response to the refugee crisis, the doors that were shut in the faces of those fleeing terror, the barbed wire fences built to keep people out like they were animals, the European lifeboats that had been ordered back into ports with the thousands of lives lost as a

result. But what became obvious in the research I undertook across Europe was that this reaction wasn't specific to refugees - it was part of a much wider and more violent reaction against otherness that had been growing under the surface for years. 2016 was not some sudden shift - it was simply the year in which we pulled back the covers and began to realise the extent of the decay.

The decay in our own values.

The decay in the principles that make use who we are.

I had assumed these principles and values were sacrosanct.

But far from it.

If 2016 has taught me anything it is that nothing is sacrosanct.

The values that our grandparents fought and died for are not hardwired into their grandchildren.

Each generation must reassert them and fight for them.

There is no automatic brake in our societies that gets deployed when we start to come off the rails, in fact the descent can be sudden.

A couple of years ago who would have predicted that Nazis would almost win the Austrian Presidency, that a President would be elected in the United States who had promised to ban a religious group from entering the country and that populism would have emerged in Germany for the first time since the second world war. The values that we hold dear are simply a construct, only as strong as the foundations underlying them and the scaffolding that we create.

So my life now is dedicated to two things; firstly, bathing our children in love, giving them the security, adventure and joy that children should find in life and secondly to reinforcing that scaffolding and deepening those foundations.

As part of this we have to get better at telling stories. Of course the story of Anne Frank is a great example of this.

The reason she has become such an icon is not because her story is more important than the millions of other who died in the Holocaust, it is because it was told as the story of an individual, first by her and then by others.

The populists and extremists tend to be much better at connecting emotionally with the worst human instincts, exploiting fear and insecurity - we need to be even better at building emotional connections to the best of our human instincts, our solidarity, our empathy and our love.

We talk less about statistics and more about stories, the Syrian refugees in Manchester who went out into the storm to rebuild flood defences, a community who wanted to protect their neighbours who had sheltered them in their own hour of need rather than a discussion about their net contribution to GDP.

We also need to bring together those who support British values of tolerance and fair play into a wider movement.

At the moment that constituency is too often fractured, fragmented and emasculated. It's power focussed on particular constituencies - migrant, Muslim, Jew, LGBT - rather than the uniting around values of tolerance, inclusion and community.

You will know Pastor Niemoller's poem:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist,
then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew and then they came
for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.

That insight about the need for different constituencies to support each other and our shared values
is as true today as it ever was. And finally, we also need to get better at celebrating what binds us
together.

We speak too much about difference and diversity and not enough about what binds us together,
from food to football from tea to tennis .

When we have a moment like a Jubilee or an Olympic games the nation unites, the problem is that
while we build multiple moments that showcase our disagreements, we build far too few that pull us
together. This is something I am committed to addressing in 2017.

To conclude, it is very possible that 2016 could go down as a historic turning point, a year in which
the UK and Europe turned in a direction that we couldn't come back from.

But it could also be the wake up call that we needed. A shattering of our complacency and a catalyst
to bring our country back together again around the things that unite us.