

Over the years, Dr Carol Rittner has edited a number of books exploring the intersection of faith and genocide, with titles such as *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, *The Courage to Care: Non-Jews Who Rescued Jews During the Holocaust*, *Will Genocide Ever End?* and *Genocide in Rwanda: Complicity of the Churches*. One would suspect, with such a dour and wrenching bibliography, that the woman on the other end of this conversation would be a model of the stern, serious nun, thoroughly hardened by a lifetime spent writing margin notes in the annals of evil. Carol Rittner is not that. Carol is the kind of nun that gets things done.

Like most lapsed Catholics, I grew up with a very particular sense of what it meant to be a nun. Carol doesn't fit that mold. A hyphenate of the highest order—who cast off her habit in 1971—she has been, over the past half-century, an academic, an activist, an outspoken critic of the church, an administrator, a liaison to the United Nations, and an Academy Award-nominated filmmaker. When Elie Wiesel, the great Jewish-American writer of the Holocaust, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, he used his prize money to establish a Foundation, which he entrusted to Carol to run. She has worked on conferences for the UN, and brought great thinkers and politicians—from Günter Grass to François Mitterrand—around summit tables, pushing them to ask difficult questions, and to attempt, somehow, to understand that which we think to be unknowable.

I speak to Carol a couple of times, first from her home in New Jersey, where, not far down the road from Atlantic City, she teaches Holocaust and Genocide Studies to eager young students, and later in Derry, Northern Ireland. When I ask her what she's doing that far from home, she tells me a long and beautiful story about the vanished Jews of the area, a quiet focus of her research now for twenty years. It wasn't the Holocaust; it wasn't anything malicious. It's just that one day there were Jews, and the next day there weren't. People had memories of Madame Beck, who used to sell hats to their mother, and Mr Frieslander, who sold the vegetables, but they didn't remember when they left, or why. The former synagogue, now lost anonymously in Pump Street. Carol has set about rescuing that history, and plans to publish that work online at a site she has named 'The Presence of Absence'.

Her energy radiates so strongly that, after our first conversation is over, I haven't realised we've spent an hour talking about the worst atrocities of humanity—it is the laughter that is sticking with me. I think of all the hours in my life spent with those who taught the Holocaust as something from which we could take nothing more than the idea of evil. In that, the profound questions were becoming lost. Questions of courage, of responsibility, of complicity. More than anything, it is the questions that keep Carol going.

PATRICK PITTMAN:

What was it that led you to the life of a Sister of Mercy? And what keeps you in that life now?

CAROL RITTNER:

I was young and idealistic and I thought I was going to save the world! Next year, I'll have been a Sister of Mercy for 50 years. I've been in this business for a long time.

I went to a Catholic high school, where I met wonderful women. I suppose I was just on the cusp of Women's Liberation. It was the time of Pope John XXIII, the period of getting ready for the Second Vatican Council, John Kennedy was President, and there was a lot of excitement in this country.

I wanted to give my life to something bigger than myself, and I saw these women who were take-charge women, who were teachers and administrators. I was spurred on by what I want to say are the best values in the church: serving others, serving unselfishly, and trying to make this a better world.

But I always say that it's not what attracted you that keep you there. I don't know if you're married or not but if you are, whatever attracted you to your wife, it wears off after a while, and then you have to think about the deeper issues. It's the same with being a nun. I've been very fortunate. When I was living in a larger community, I lived with great women. I mean, you have your usual problems. You can't live with people day-in and day-out, and not have those things-somebody's having a bad day, is a pain in the butt, whatever it may be-but I have always lived with great women who were out there every day just doing their best for people. Even though we're older and fewer, there's a lot of energy that is still around. Some women are high profile; others are very quietly in parishes and neighborhoods, in cities and rural areas, just getting on with doing the work. They're smart, they're intelligent and they're critical.

I was reading your beautiful commencement address to the College of Saint Mary's in Omaha. One of the things you talk about in that is the importance of asking questions, of unsettling.

I think that if people-whether it's myself or my students or my friends-are able to be reflective enough to really ask deep questions, it says that we're thinking, that we're not just living on the surface. One of the exercises that I have my students do is identify a question and to argue why I should take that question seriously. Why is the question important? If we can ask questions and live with questions, we can deal with the answers, because answers always change.

If all we're interested in is answers, then when we discover that they no longer satisfy, that's when we withdraw into ourselves, or withdraw from work that we're doing.

The ability to ask questions keeps us thinking, keeps us reflecting and keeps us alive.

Some people don't like to do that-it's too disturbing to them-but I think that kind of disturbance is good. It keeps us on edge enough to keep us alive.

For some time, you were heading up the foundation of one of the great writers of the Holocaust, the Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel. How did that come about?

When I was a much younger person, I became very interested in the Holocaust as a result of reading Victor Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning*. I was this young, zealous nun, and when I read it, I kept asking myself, why didn't Christians help these Jews? Of course, that was a naive question, but I later discovered, through my own research and work, that, historically, there had been an underside to Christian theology which was very anti-Jewish. Later, when I read Wiesel's book *Night*, I was blown away.

.. You and John Roth write in one of the introduction to your books that the Holocaust is not over, and never will be. It scarred heaven and earth too much for that. When I was recently in Israel, there was that maelstrom of ideas, confusion, fear and joy at the same time. I couldn't really nail down a lot of that, but then going to Yad Vashem and walking through that hall of horrors, my soul dragging itself behind on that stark metal ground, and getting to the end, leaning over the railing, light streaming down as you look out over the hills of Jerusalem. Something timeless and endless became clear there. It's almost unknowable, the scale of what we're talking about.

and people suffocated in that most horrible way. In places like Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone, and in Rwanda, where you had such horror, up close. There were more people who were killed in the ninety days of the genocide in Rwanda, faster than during the Holocaust, with machetes and pickaxes and shovels.

I stand speechless before the horror. When I go to Yad Vashem, and just walk through those galleries of horror, I just want to be quiet. I don't want to hear people talking. I don't even like to hear the docents explaining things to people. I want to say, "Don't say anything, just walk through and look at it and feel it." Try to reflect on it.

I'm a teacher of this stuff and when I try to teach students, I don't try to explain it. How can you? What I try to do is raise questions.

Last year the question that really intrigued me was the question of 'What is the role of good people in difficult times?' Because people, sometimes they'll say to me, 'What would you have done? What would you have done if you had lived in Nazi Germany or occupied Europe?'

I always say that I can tell you what I wish and hope that I would have done, but I don't know if I could have done. I'm sure I can be carried along by a crowd, I'm not sure if I have courage to stand up against such forces.

It interests me that you talk about that courage and you say you stand speechless, but you do tell stories, and you do question repeatedly. You poke and prod at your own faith and its complicity—do you feel that comes at a personal or spiritual risk? When you question past popes, do you lose friends?

In terms of my own faith, at this point in my life, I've decided what I believe and don't believe. I know that popes and bishops and nuns and priests are human. I really don't put too much stock in popes, to be perfectly honest. I feel like they don't have a whole lot of credibility.

For all of your work and all of your study in this area, do you ever get towards believing in such a thing as 'never again'?

Oh it is, it is. It's, we're talking about evil. At a level so deep that people can't put words to it we thought we recognized and saw the horrors that human beings could do to each other during the Holocaust, but we still see terrible horrors happening today. John Roth and I are working on another book about rape as a weapon of war and genocide. What happened to so many people during the Holocaust was, one could say, somewhat impersonal. I mean, you stuffed people into a gas chamber, you closed the door, dumped the Cyclon B

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No. No. I haven't lost friends, but there are people who think that any time you are critical, particularly about Pious XII, they react in a very negative way, and very defensively. Usually when I go to do something like that, I make sure that I have my ammunition, so to speak. That I have my evidence lined up

I think that's become rhetoric, I think it's empty. I think we see just how self-

serving all of our countries are. Take today; look at what's happening in Sudan, in Somalia. How many of our national governments are really stepping up and doing anything? We look to see well, how's this going to benefit or not benefit us in our national interest? This thing about 'never again', that's not language I use.

Unfortunately I think the human condition is such that we don't learn. One of my favorite stories as a child was the story of the little Dutch boy; who puts his finger in the hole in the dyke and saves the whole town. He holds back the water. I say that's all we can do. We put our finger in the dyke.

Most of us, we feel like 'Oh my god, it's so overwhelming, what can I do?', and I say we have to do what we can, where we are, with what we have, for as long as we can.

During the Holocaust, I think people felt overwhelmed, and so they retreated into their little private worlds of self-concern. After all, there was a war going on, people had families to take care of. I say look, I'm not the messiah, you're not the messiah, we're not going to save the world, but we do what we can.

A few years back, you turned your attention to Rwanda, where the lessons of history were not learned. Philip Gourevitch's great book on the genocide they takes its title from an unheeded letter written by those trapped in a church to their bishop, *We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*. What did you take from studying the role of faith, or perhaps more so of the church, in Rwanda?

Let me put it in a cliché. We don't practice what we preach. Or maybe we do practice what we preach, and sometimes what we preach is that the 'other' is not like us, and is outside our universe of moral concern. When you ask me what I take from it, well: shame. Enormous shame. Look at what happened during the Holocaust. We can't

let the few who did live out the highest ideals, who did follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who were compassionate, who were willing to lay down their lives for their friends, balance off the many who failed.

What we, the churches, were good at, was baptizing. We weren't so good at evangelising, of helping people to get the message: greater love than this, a person does not have, than to lay down his or her life for his or her friends.

I take away from it that the numbers are not important, the message is important. It was shocking to me to realize that Rwanda was, not in terms of gross numbers but percentages, the most Christian country in all of Africa. That's shameful to me.

Sometimes I joke to my Jewish friends, 'Move over, you may get another.'

It's shameful, it's terrible to hear and to realize that we have failed in an unspeakable way.

The other thing that I take from the Rwanda situation is that you should not cozy up to government. It annoys me every time I go into a Catholic church and I see, in the sanctuary, a papal flag and an American flag. You have those two flags sitting in the sanctuary and you can't preach in a way that is healthily critical.

The churches, particularly the Roman Catholic and the Anglican Church were very, very tied into the government and were part of the major political party in Rwanda. I think we should be involved in the political process in any country, but involved in such a way that we can critique it.

As a questioning voice, or a dissenting voice. Absolutely. But when we're in a situation where we have something to lose, then we tend not to critique, which was one of the situations in Germany

during the Hitler era. The Church had a lot to lose, and so its voice was silenced, because it would have lost its schools, its institutions, its power base. I think that there are people who think that's it's better to criticize from the inside than from the outside, and I think they tend to be silent. I think we do it in my country, and I'm sure in your own country, where church people who are cozy with political people tend not to be very critical of them.

It reminds me of the famous story of the Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and his journey through that in Germany in the 1930s and 40s. Stepping outside of that involved immense personal sacrifice. At the time, perhaps, it may not have achieved what he wanted to achieve, but history remembers him.

Absolutely. There's a man who was willing to give his life for his principles. First of all, he could have stayed in this country: he came to this country; he was teaching at Union Theological in New York—he could have been safe. But he went back to Germany, and he was part of that very minor voice, the resistance. The resistance within the Church, within his church and the churches, and in the resistance within Germany. But to do that you have to be prepared for the consequences.

tance within the Church, within his church and the churches, and in the resistance within Germany. But to do that you have to be prepared for the consequences.

You know what they say, if you want to be like Jesus, you're going to end up like Jesus. Daniel Berrigan once said if you're going to be like Jesus, you better be sure you look good on wood.

It is really, really tough.

It's only recently, in the last ten or fifteen years that he's really been recognized as one of those voices who was prepared to go the whole way. I look at myself and ask, am I prepared to go the whole way? I don't know that I can say I am.

Can you know the answer to that question before you're asked it?

Well, one is asked it in more ways than just verbally. I think we get hints, we get hints of what we would do. This is what I say to students all the time, of course we don't know, we can look at what we do. Am I willing to say something to someone who tells a joke that demeans people of colour, Jews or Muslims? Today, there aren't so many jokes about Jews, but there are jokes about Muslims. Or women.

Do we have the courage to say I don't think that's very funny? If a group of guys are out having a drink at a bar or a fraternity party or whatever, or girls, it's pretty tough to stand up and say I don't think that's funny at all.

I do think we get hints, but ultimately of course we never know.

You talked about heading into the Sisters of Mercy at the same time as the Women's Liberation movement was kicking off. There were so many directions your life could have gone at that time.

You have to understand I was too young to even know about Women's Liberation and all of that. I did not come from a particularly pious or religious family; we went to Mass on Sunday, my father was a Protestant, my mother was a Catholic.

I went to a Catholic high school where I had these wonderful, lively, energetic teachers. I'm sure I was attracted to their energy, to their sense of purpose, and in addition to this, the sense that God was calling me to do a good work and to give my life to something larger.

Who knows? If it had been five years later, maybe I would have felt many of the same things but I would have seen other avenues. I'm not saying all of this is conscious, it's on reflection. I had a friend, who was a year ahead of me in high school,

her name was Michelle. She was going to be a nun, and we were great friends. And of course, you know how it goes: "You're going to be a nun? I'm going to be a nun too!" The interesting thing is that she left her religious community after about seven years. She married—in fact, her daughter is getting married in September. She left, I stayed.

I first taught for three years in a Catholic high school with wonderful women who were my superiors, and who encouraged me to read and to think and discuss and ask questions, and then to go on to graduate school. That didn't happen in a lot of religious congregations, by which I mean orders of nuns. You had to be practically near retirement before you were sent on for a doctorate.

At that time, it was post-Vatican II and there was a lot of excitement and openness in the Church. When Pope John Paul II came in, he was absolutely great on Jewish-Christian relations and the Holocaust and all that,

but for the all the wonderful things that he did in that area, he would not be one of my favourite popes.

He had a pretty traditional view about women and about how nuns should look and act. I'm not saying that he said they should be seen and not heard but I think he preferred them the way they are in Poland, which is very identifiable, very subservient to the clergy.

I felt called—when I say called I mean called by God—so I feel like I'm doing something that I should be doing, that this feels right to me. I'm more than just a professor. I probably would have gone on to graduate school, and I probably would have had many of the same interests that I have today, but I see my life as somehow—in the most positive sense of the word—trying to act as Jesus would act: accepting of people, in service to God's people, trying to bring people together. That's why I'm here and that's why I continue to live this life. You can't do it if you're just going to be a professor.

You've talked a little about the changes in the Catholic Church over that time, but have you felt a change in your Order in the same time?

You mean did I feel that we'd become more conservative?

That's not necessarily what I was asking...

I'll only speak about the American Sisters of Mercy

because they're the ones I obviously know the best, but I would suspect it's quite similar in Australia, probably Australia, Newfoundland, and perhaps in the UK and Ireland as well, we're a very educated group of women. I'm not saying everyone has a doctorate but I would guess that there is no woman in the US that is a member of the Sisters of Mercy who does not have at least a bachelor's degree, and many who have a master's degree. We are of the garden variety—we have interesting women and we have boring women; we have women who are energetic and they're out there even as we get older, they're still out there serving. And we have other people that I would say to them, "Get a job for God's sake."

Both within the community and outside, we would probably tend politically to be more on the progressive side, in the States we would probably tend to be more in favour of the Democrats and Obama than the Republicans and Michelle Bachmann and Rick Perry and Newt Gingrich and these crazies. Within the community itself, I would say that we're loyal, in the sense that after all, we're here to serve the people of God whoever they are, wherever, all of them! Black, white, Jew, Christian, Hindu, Muslim whatever. Everybody—that's what we're about.

When I began to teach about the Holocaust-about thirty-five years ago- there was a foundation that made grants to colleges and universities of two thousand dollars. So I wrote this proposal to try to get that money to bring Elie Wiesel to Mercy College of Detroit. Elie wasn't a Nobel laureate yet, or really still well known, and his fee was that two thousand dollars. I invited him to come, I picked him up at the airport and he was extremely gracious to me. He gave a wonderful lecture. I decided I wanted to do a larger project, called 'After Auschwitz, Vision or Void?' It would be a huge conference, and I wanted to commission the Detroit Symphony, who were a world-class symphony at the time, to do a piece to commemorate the rescue of the Danish Jews. This would have been in 1984. I told the president of the college and she said, "Oh, the Holocaust suffers from overkill."

That's an unfortunate choice of words. Isn't that ironic?

I was going to Israel to do some work and Elie was going to be there. We had sort of become friends, but when I say friends, you know! I was really in awe of him. I told him about this conference idea and he said "Carol, I'll help you."

So I organised, with Elie-though you know I obviously did all the work-this big conference at the US State Department called, 'Faith in Human Kind: Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust'. We brought about sixty of these old people who had been honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous among the Gentiles. I won't go into detail but it was a fantastic scholarly conference as well as an emotional conference.

At the time, a lot of the conversation was around, 'Who suffered more, you think you suffered? No I suffered more, but you suffered.' You know, this was the Jews and the Poles and the Russians. It was really ugly stuff and I said to Elie, you know, we should do a conference on non-Jewish victims of the Nazis and bring the best people in the world in. So we did another conference, in Washington, at the State Department and I made two films, one was called *The Courage to Care*, which was nominated in 1986 for an Academy Award as a short documentary, though we didn't get it.

A nomination's alright, though! It was great to be nominated. By then, Elie had left the Holocaust Memorial, he'd gotten the Nobel, and there was money attached to the Nobel Peace Prize, so he decided to start his own little foundation. I asked me if I would be the first director and I said, "Okay, but I'll always be honest with you, I'll never tell you what you want to hear, I'll give you my best insight; it may not be correct; but I'll give you my best."

I went to New York, where he handed me a file folder. I opened the folder and it had one deposit slip in it, for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. We didn't even have an office space at the time. I ran the foundation for three years. Elie is a wonderful man with great ideas.

***He'd say, 'I believe in miracles' and I'd say,
"Yes and I do them!"***

He was energetic, he was creative. He was maddening only in the sense that he had more ideas than we had staff. At the end of a couple of years, I felt like I was going to kill myself, and I couldn't do that, so it was time for me to leave, but we've always maintained a wonderful relationship.



We can be very critical, of course *we* will find Sisters of Mercy who, if the Pope says 'Jump' they say 'How high?' on the way up. And then there are others, if the Pope says 'Jump' they say, 'you gotta be kidding', you know, or 'what for?'

There's a line from the Christian scriptures that says 'Be simple as a dove and wily as a serpent'. You can't achieve what we as a community have achieved if you're always fighting against the establishment. You can't have hospitals and schools and colleges and universities and constantly be against the establishment. You have to learn how to, as one of our Sisters said in a book she wrote, connect the rich with the poor, and the powerful with the powerless. We're probably a little more savvy about how we do that these days. In my view, the mood in the huge institutional church has changed. I mean, it's more like an identity politics kind of thing, to be identifiably a Roman Catholic Christian, to be identifiably a nun.

What does it mean to not wear the habit? Oh, interesting question. What does it mean? I think that it means each one of us individually has to take far more responsibility to live, to let our actions match our words. I think not wearing the habit means I have more responsibility that if I'm sitting on an aeroplane or I'm in a restaurant or whatever and some man starts flirting with *me*, I have to be real clear about who I am. I'm not saying, "Wait, stop I'm a nun!" but the responsibility falls more on me because I'm not so outwardly identified as a nun.

You know it's been so long, I haven't worn a habit since 1971, you know so that's a long time. Maybe 35 years ago I would have been thinking about it much more than I think about it now.

That distancing when you talk about the bracket Church, I do think there are clergy, and I'm speaking of bishops and archbishops-probably that seems to be something that they desire of the nun. the Pope himself-who would prefer nuns as these sort of neutral beings. For some clergy it's very threatening if you have an attractive, competent, articulate woman who's the principal of your school or the chair of your department or the president of the college or the whatever.

I mean they're very threatening to them; the only women in their lives with whom they've really had any kind of relationship is their mother and their sisters,

maybe their aunts, so it's easier I think, for some clergy to keep us out there, sort of in our little cage.

I remember once I got stopped by a state policeman, I was zooming down the highway, I didn't realise I was going quite as fast as I was. I got pulled over and was sitting there, thinking everybody driving past knows who I am. He comes and takes my licence and he goes back to his car and he checks to see if I'm an escaped murderer or something. He comes back and he says to me, "Are you a nun?" I said, "Yes I am." He said, "You know you can't tell you girls anymore!" I suppose if I'd been flying down the highway with my veil blowing in the wind, he wouldn't have thought something but that's it, you can't tell us anymore unless we let our actions try to speak as loudly as our words.