Reflections on a life studying human depravity

By Glenn C. Altschuler

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For more than half a century, Robert Jay Lifton has studied the victims and perpetrators of war crimes. Lampooned as “Dr. Hiroshima” by psychiatric residents at Yale University for his “intensity bordering on obsession” with victims of war, Lifton often promised that his next study would be about “love, sexual pleasure, and human goodness.”

He never delivered. With books on Chinese mind-control of US soldiers during the Korean War, Japanese survivors of nuclear bombings, anti-Vietnam War GIs, and genocidal Nazi doctors, Lifton has continued to probe some of the most disturbing psychological problems of our age. His work, he confesses, satisfies “a certain research macho.” More importantly, it helps us understand moral insanity, cruelty, cults, and the resilience of changeable human beings.

In “Witness to an Extreme Century,” Lifton reflects on his personal life and political values; the relationship between individual psychology and historical and ideological context, especially as it results in patterns of “totalistic” thinking and behavior; and his astonishing array of professional associations and friendships. His memoir focuses primarily on his professional life and serves as a fascinating backstage account of his fieldwork in human depravity — and of intellectual life in the United States in the second half of the 20th century.

Lifton’s account of his interviews with Nazi doctors is riveting. One such physician, who was an admirer of Joseph Mengele, explained that, like Mengele, he had viewed Auschwitz as less a moral problem than a technical one, involving the search for more efficient ways to burn bodies. Forced to listen politely and suppress moral judgment, Lifton reveals, he felt, by turns, “repelled, speechless, immobilized . . . enraged,” and, as a Jew, “demeaned.” On the tapes of the interviews, he could hear “a cross between a sigh and a groan” emanating from him, as he responded “Yes” and “Right,” struggling, in what “seemed a hideous compromise,” to keep the conversation going.

Lifton also learned, however, that this doctor also had rescued some inmates from the gas chambers — and had shocked colleagues by trying to locate Simon Cohen, a boyhood friend whom he thought he had spotted in Auschwitz. And so, Lifton developed the concept of “doubling,” in which the self is divided into two separately functioning wholes. He began to understand that Nazis could — and did — live a lie without experiencing it as a lie or feeling responsible for the extermination of Jews. Good people, Lifton concludes, can do bad things; but, he hastens to add, they cease to be good people.

Throughout his career, Lifton exchanged ideas with influential writers in the United States, and “Witness to an Extreme Century” is a candid and compelling examination of his rewarding and rocky relationships with Erik Erikson, Margaret Mead, Norman Mailer, David Riesman, and Arthur Koestler. A pioneer in the field of psychoanalysis and human development, Erikson was an especially important mentor, reinforcing Lifton’s ambivalence about Freudian theory. Later in life, Lifton writes, he was able to return the favor, when his research on Nazi doctors stimulated Erikson to reexamine long suppressed feelings about his German childhood, finding an “American” voice, and his conflicts over his own Jewishness.

An octogenarian, Lifton has slowed a bit but has not mellowed. He remains a fierce critic of “totalism” in any form, be it Aum Shinrikyo, the religious group that released lethal sarin gas on five Tokyo subway trains; Al Qaeda; or the Manichean “Superpower Syndrome” of the United States. As a witness to an extreme century, Lifton continues to challenge us to denounce “the dreadful overall phenomenon we call war” and reclaim a role as life-affirming, life-enhancing healers. Just in time, one can hope, for him to write that book about love, sexual pleasure, and human goodness.

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