

“A Question of Scope”

First off, I just want to thank RJ Jenkins for advising me on this speech (and on life) and Sandy Alexander, both for putting this project together and for his speech advice as well.

Several years ago, I found myself standing in front of a war memorial. The memorial wasn't imposing, wasn't impressive, just a slab of stone in a small town. It was dedicated to town residents who had died in the Second World War. The over one hundred names represented a crippling loss to the town of only a few thousand. Now, we've all seen memorials before, listing name after faceless name, every death a tragedy, but often impossible to relate to, words on a slab of stone that could never convey the life they represent.

And yet, I felt a connection to the names on this rock. The vast majority were family to me, though I never knew them, distant cousins, but family nonetheless. Every “Oberst” took on a real persona in my mind, someone with a family and friends, someone who died fighting for his country, or his family. And his loss, his death hurt me in a way I couldn't describe, in a totally irrational, and a totally natural way, as though I had just discovered a long-lost brother... only to attend his funeral.

Long, contemplative silence. Then, with a sense of trepidation, tinged with confusion, mixed in with a bit of youthful tactlessness, my younger brother broke the stillness with a question:

“But...”, he asked, “weren't they Nazis?”

My father responded, “They were people”

This scene takes place in Unteröwisheim, a small town in Baden-Württemberg, Germany. Nearly half of the residents there share my last name (Oberst), and nearly all of those Obersts are distantly related to me. The memorial to WWII wasn't the only monument in the town square, in front of the small protestant church. Beside it stood a WWI memorial, and even a memorial to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Little craters were visible on both, marks carved out by machine gun fire. I could imagine, I could almost see right there before me, a soldier taking cover, trading fire with “the enemy”, fighting and dying as part of a futile effort to stop an allied advance.

My father's answer wasn't a Yes, and it wasn't a No. There was no way to tell who these men were, what crimes they may or may not have committed. Some of them were surely bad men, as some people inevitably are, and I couldn't expect them to be different just because they were family. Yet I couldn't help but think, standing there in a town scarred by bullets and death, that maybe, just maybe, they fought for the safety of their loved ones against a perceived threat. The only constant was they were people, they HAD to be, because they were somehow my family, which made them real to me.

I was used to thinking about WWII from an American perspective, about the G.I.s killed in service of our country fighting against a faceless force of evil. But these monuments, littered with my own name, forced me to realize the human loss on both sides. We are, all of us, family, and war is, reduced to its essence, brothers killing brothers.

Our lives will only ever have a certain scope. People whom I've never met, who I know nothing about, those people are outside my experience, and they exist to me only as faceless, nameless beings, easy to categorize and dismiss. They are not real to me. Harvard is real to me, Lowell is

real to me, and I understand how complex Lowellians and kids at Harvard are, because I've met them, and real people are complicated.

Accepting people requires us to broaden the scope of our existence. What I learned in Germany was that even a tenuous familial relationship to a German soldier allowed me to see past the associations built up in my mind, and see him as a person. It gave me just enough knowledge about him to make him real, just enough detail for me to get an inkling of his humanity.

I'm sure there are people in this dining hall, right now, who have no idea who I am, beyond another nameless stranger sharing a campus. Well, you should know a few things. I never make it to hot breakfast on Saturdays. I have a favorite food (Red Spiced Chicken). I like to work out but I don't do it as often as I should, and I had a childhood crush on a totally unobtainable girl, and the list goes on.

But here's the point: The details are what make people real, so learn some of them, starting with the people you see every day but know nothing about. And while you're at it, keep in mind that even those people you'll never meet are people nonetheless.