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| The Miami HeraldPosted on Sat, Jul. 26, 2014**Leonard Pitts Jr.: Taking selfies in the wrong places**By Leonard Pitts Jr.lpitts@MiamiHerald.comIn a place haunted by ghosts, on a thoroughfare of the damned, standing upon ground once watered by blood, Breanna Mitchell lifted a camera to take her own picture. She smiled a sunshine smile.And the Internet exploded.The image the Alabama teenager captured of herself at Auschwitz, an earbud in one ear, has gone viral in the month since she posted it on Twitter. She’s been harshly criticized. She’s been called vile names. And yes, she’s endured that act of lazy person’s terrorism, the Internet death threat.Mitchell insists she is unbowed. She explained in a video interview for something called “TakePart Live” that she wouldn’t do anything differently because she didn’t mean any harm. The photo, she says, was meant to honor her father, who passed his love of World War II history on to her. It was taken on the anniversary of his death.Mitchell’s attitude toward her international notoriety is probably best summed up in a tweet she posted July 20: “I’m famous y’all.”Ahem.I don’t generally use this space to beat up teenagers for doing regrettable things. Doing regrettable things is pretty much your job description at that age, and I’ve always felt you should be free to go about that job without the spotlight of media attention.But what Mitchell did seems to demand a few words. Especially since she’s not the only one doing it. To the contrary, we learn that it has become quite the modern “thing,” people clowning, sticking out their tongues, lifting thumbs up, grinning like loons in somber and sacred places. They’ve done it at Auschwitz, at the New York memorial to the victims of 9/11, at the American cemetery at Normandy, at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, at grandmother’s funeral.Nor is it just kids who are doing it. To the contrary, there exists a photo of a certain 52-year-old president of the United States grinning for a selfie with British Prime Minister David Cameron, and Danish Prime Minister Helle-Thorning Schmidt (both 47) at last year’s memorial service for Nelson Mandela. First lady Michelle Obama sits apart from them wearing a somber, funeral-appropriate expression that says clearly, “I don’t know these people.”Look, I understand this is not exactly a federal crime. And yes, I get that people take pictures of themselves in order to place themselves in a context. It is a way of saying, “I was there.” Nothing wrong with that. I’ve done it myself.But this whole thing of mugging for cameras in inappropriate places feels viscerally . . . wrong. It suggests a cluelessness, a shallowness and an incapacity for reverence that have come to feel like the signature of these times. It suggests a lack of home training and a surplus of narcissism that have come to feel ubiquitous. For all her professed love of World War II history, Breanna Mitchell bespeaks a fundamental lack of respect for, and comprehension of, that history when she poses at Auschwitz — death place for nearly 1.1 million human beings — like she thinks she’s at Epcot.That should not even have to be explained. But social media have rewritten the social contract and apparently what once did not need explaining now does — to kids and, worse, to their parents. More’s the pity.Do we take nothing seriously? Is nothing so awful or so awesome as to make us look up from our own lives? Is no place so hallowed or holy that we would never think to use it as a stage upon which to showcase the fizzy wonderfulness of our own selves?Apparently, not.When you take a picture of yourself grinning and mugging at some sacred place, it diminishes the place and sends a message that has become too common: This is all about me.And you know what? It isn’t. |

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