

## “Listen to the Voices of the Soil” (*Sluchac Glosu Ziemi Oswiecimskieg*): Reflections on Auschwitz

“Listen to the voices of the soil.” Passing through the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau during the Zen Peacemakers “Bearing Witness Retreat”, my body resonates with this Polish expression encouraging us to listen to the soil as a way of being in this place. The body of the earth, my human body and all the bodies that were extinguished here and now feed the trees and grass bear witness to the unbearable.

Finding my own voice for this writing has been challenging. What to say? What does not sound trite, disturbingly familiar, or just somehow wrong? Then these attacks in Paris exploded into consciousness. Along with the bombings in Beirut, Baghdad and the Russian plane in the Sinai, though not the same as genocide, these acts, I believe, arise from the same dark places within human beings. Bearing witness to the past is also bearing witness to the present and the future.

May these somewhat random reflections be helpful in some way:

- My first shock is discovering that it is not the deaths that touch deepest. Somehow I am at peace with the reality of death. There is some kind of core knowing that love is stronger than death. Something in me can bow to the passing of young and old. This bowing includes deep, wrenching sorrow. Still, in this place, it is not the deaths, it is the inhumanity, the cruelty, the intentional attempt to destroy the human spirit that twists in my guts. The casual enjoyment of debasement, even as it obviously debases the perpetrator, evokes some kind of deep shout, “NO” – this is not possible, not acceptable, a loud desperate “NO, not in my world”!

- We are an interfaith group with services offered in Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Native American (Lakota) traditions. Father Manfred, a Catholic priest from Germany who came for one year to face his cultural guilt and has stayed for more than twenty years, leads a small group of us through the “Stations of the Cross”. The words from Jesus Christ as he is being crucified: “**My God, My God, why hath Thou forsaken me?**”, seem to me to be the most essential, heart-wrenching prayer/meditation/question for all of us in the face of such wanton acts. For Jewish people, committed to their covenant with God while enduring this vicious attempt at their annihilation, this question cuts to the core of faith. Yet, isn’t it true for all of us? Whether we say God, Life, Nature, Destiny, What Is or whatever term we give to our deepest understanding of this journey through life – in our dark nights, we ask loudly or quietly, “why me?” “How did this happen?” And perhaps, “please help me.”

One marvels in mystery at the ensuing phrase on the cross: “**Into your hands I commend my Spirit**”. This willingness to say “even when I feel abandoned by you, I do not turn away from you” is an act of such trust. Where do we ordinary human beings find the faith, courage, and commitment to Life in such circumstance? Buddha taught about the “basic goodness” of our true nature. At our core, we are good and Life is good.

Confidence in this essential goodness, not as a denial or rationalization but as a pre-verbal knowing is also an act of great faith. We could also say: “Into the unfolding of this Life, I commend my spirit”. Even those of us committed to “not-knowing” as a core tenet for living this life, can find solace connecting to the essence of being alive. Perhaps this is where meditation and prayer meet.

Right now, how do we open our eyes to all that is occurring to our precious earth, to the animals, to our fellow human beings and still have faith in THIS life? With or without theistic language, what is it to witness violent destruction and yet maintain faith in the unfolding of our Life process? There are exquisite, noble trees that were continually raining bright yellow leaves upon our heads at Auschwitz, trees that grew from the ashes of innocent beings. To live with eyes open and a thoroughly loving heart is our incredibly demanding task. Rather than contributing to the fear and divisiveness, can we be emissaries of love and care for all beings? How can we overcome our fear? How can our experience of interconnectivity and our confidence in this unknowable life process become our ground state? There are no answers, only these profound questions for each of us to live into from the foundation of our Being.

- In the last two days at Birkenau, I experience a turning, something changing in me. We practice meditation in two main forms at the railroad tracks where the “selections” would occur: 1) just sitting in the silence, and 2) taking turns reciting the names of people who died here. During my final reading, the names of two babies, Helga Wagner 1941-1943 and Josef Wagner 1942-1943 appeared on my list. Whereas I could find peace with the deaths of millions, the extinguishing of these two particular rays of light broke through to a new place in me. It is not the idea that I often hear of “what they could have been”, rather, it is just the absencing of the individual, these individuals and the preciousness of each human being.

I am reminded of my heart teacher Shunryu Suzuki saying “just to be alive is enough”. And this is the great teaching that is reaffirmed from bearing witness here. We share this life together, this unfathomable gift. We value it and preserve it together. Knowing how each spoonful of soup was life-saving in the camps, I notice my eating here at home is different. When I am eating, I eat with everyone. When I feel cold, I notice my thoughts go to those refugees and other homeless people who, right now, are shivering. Surprisingly, these spontaneous connections do not create guilt but rather profound gratitude for the simple gifts of life. From this gratitude for the abundant comforts in my world, I am also inspired to take actions that hopefully can relieve the suffering of others. Both of these seems equally important to me – deep gratitude, really letting in the joys and gifts that arise in my world, along with actions for the benefit of others. Auschwitz is a place of vast destruction and great healing, listening to the voices of this soil, I am profoundly grateful.

*“A sacred place is one where the earth’s voice can be heard clearly. Go to these places and listen. Once you have heard her, she can reach you anywhere”.*

- Frederic Lehrman

(at the entrance of “The Center for Dialogue and Prayer” where we stayed during our retreat)