

“What Remains”: Final letter from Auschwitz

Russell Delman November 2016

In English, "the remains", when used as a noun, refers to a body after death. What is left over when life leaves the body? As a verb, "to remain" means "to stay behind" or "what stays" or "to stay after something is complete". In this letter, I am asking the question, what remains or lives on from this journey to Auschwitz?

Sometimes when walking around the grounds of the immense Auschwitz 2 (Birkenau), one finds bits of bone, the literal remains of a person. One also walks by fields in which the ashes of people have become the fertilizer for a forest of trees. How strange to see these beautiful, majestic trees growing from these ashes.

What else remains, both culturally and personally, from the experience of Auschwitz? As described in the first of these letters, the most accurate answer is "I don't know". It will take time to observe the lasting effects in my body, feelings, thoughts and actions. At the beginning of this retreat, I was asking, who would I be, how would I act, if I was here in 1943, as a guard or prisoner? I thought that answering this question might be my intention in coming here. I now see that this is an impossible and false question. The person sitting here writing comfortably in California is not the same person as the one who would be shivering and hungry in the camp. We are connected yet undeniably separate. Until pushed to such extremes, I cannot know "which of the me's" would show up.

What I can say in this moment is that I see three dominant, interconnected areas of profound learning alive in me:

1) Each and Every Child: the Radical importance of One

Standing in the children's barracks, I am struck by the serene pictures drawn on the walls, a kind-hearted attempt by an adult prisoner to add warmth to this insanely cold situation. From the remembrance of the few survivors, we are told stories of how the elder children took care of the younger, how the adults would try to set up a school with singing and learning, knowing that death was coming soon.

In the retreat, we all sat together and began to sing lullabies in many languages. We were haunted, disturbed by the place yet also warmed by our presence together. I began to feel, not the presence of "children", but of each child. I saw THAT hungry child and THIS cold infant and I shuddered as I realized that they are alive in the world today. Sometimes it is a literal child, perhaps a refugee, and, at other times, I see the child in me and in each of us who is desperately longing for care, comfort, life and, ultimately, for love.

"Don't turn away" is the call.

"I can't save them all" is the response.

"Just one, THIS one who is in your path today" is the reply.

In this sense, each child means "THIS one, THIS moment", THIS interaction, THIS situation. Sometimes we can come to the aid of an actual child. Sometimes the "child" is our own need in that moment. Sometimes it is caring for the needs of others. Our basic goodness asks us to care for life, to stand up for life as best we can, not more and not less. Without guilt or shame,

we VOW to do our best. For some of us it is to work with refugees, the hungry, the dying or the homeless. For others it is to devote ourselves to the beings living in our house and to be a loving source of light for our friends.

In the children's barracks, I sense how often I ignore the child within myself, the small voice that needs my care and how often I overlook that voice in others. People in adult bodies seem so competent that we can easily have the judgment that they "should" be able to handle their life and we forget the vulnerable child living in there also.

One step for me is letting go of the the idea of helping "everybody" and moving toward taking care of some particular, authentic need that arises in my world. Sometimes that need appears in the form of "other" and sometimes in the form of "me". IF I notice that the "me" is getting most of the attention, it is helpful to change the focus on whatever "other" is in my world and if the "others" get most of my attention to my detriment perhaps a new orientation is helpful. ANY act of goodness, of love, tilts the scales in the direction of LIFE. Each individual is precious, each sacred. We cannot save the world or all beings YET in saving one we do save all. A strange calculus, I know, yet in the one is the many, as in the many there is each one.

I notice how often I have felt paralyzed by all the needs that I see in the world. There are many needs in our immediate circles of self, family and close friends. Then there is the larger circle of our community- homelessness, environmental degradation, domestic violence, hunger, etc. Then, through modern technology, we can witness the needs of our entire planet. It is natural to want to withdraw, close one's eyes and hide, as we cannot effectively embrace all these needs. Still, we can focus on the one being or one situation that we can help today. The particular form of suffering that calls to us. The "one" is more important in the sense of being more workable, more possible, than the "many".

2) Auschwitz as metaphor, Auschwitz as Warning

The extreme violence and degradation of life witnessed here is an exaggeration of our everyday world. Most of us have internalized voices of disparaging judgments and meanness that we direct toward ourselves and others, there is a Nazi prison guard and a concentration camp prisoner living in each of us. This metaphor, like effective theater, is hyperbolic - it makes the case in an extreme way to get our attention. Can we listen to the message? Can we honor the lives that suffered here by becoming sanctuaries of kindness toward all beings? When we can't, is there a way that the metaphor of Auschwitz can remind us to turn toward the light?

And what is the warning in the horror here? Fascism is alive in our world today. The historical pattern and "rule" of fascism requires that the leader appear strong through lies and exaggerations about the "other", the one who is responsible for the suffering. Oppressed, disheartened people seek the strength that emanates from the mouth of the apparent savior. Of course, it is all backwards, this is the evil. People are suffering, they are truly feeling oppressed and the new leader loudly and boldly declares that they alone can change the system that created the problem. We see this old strategy all over the world today.

We need to see the cold calculation of it all, how the ideology of the "others" who are less human, less worthy AND the cause of our problems justifies the "final solution". Auschwitz teaches us about the potential freezing of the human heart, the Ahrimanic forces that can overtake human beings. It says to us, "do not close your eyes, these forces are in the world

today". Whereas Rwanda was an example of hot blooded killing, here we witness the cold elimination of feeling, a brain disconnected from a heart. Whether hot blooded or cold blooded, always the "other" is demeaned, labeled and dehumanized in ways that makes the unimaginable seem natural.

3) Dehumanization- Standing Up for Life

My essential learning here, the gift within the curse of Auschwitz: we must stand up for life, we must become True Human Beings.

"Evil" is "live" spelled backwards. Forces of darkness, of evil, seek to destroy life. They do this through a process of dehumanization. At Birkenau, in a building called "Central Sauna", prisoners were processed through steps: stripped, shaved, deloused and then tattooed - their name was taken away. They became a number. Names are important. In Rwanda, the Tutsi's were called cockroaches, in Vietnam the enemy were gooks, in Auschwitz they became numbers. To dehumanize the other we must remove their human name. They become inhuman to us.

When we humanize ourselves in all relationships-including our relationships with the voices in our inner world as well as with the "enemies" on the outside, we bring a living humanity into the world. In our everyday actions we can "vote" for kindness and goodness and thus earn the profound name "Human Being". Fighting against ignorance, oppression and inhumanity requires that we do not get lost in the cultural habit of "us and them". We are all "us", no one is cast out. Can ordinary people like us actually love the sinner, the perceived enemy, while standing up against any dehumanizing actions?

Standing up for life is not a naïve openness or softness. Rather it is standing up in human ways for humanity. The odd, English expression, "kill them with kindness" means to me to help eliminate the forces of malevolence that arise in this world and to see our own meanness and self-absorption with both clarity and warmth. Clarity and warmth are two essential qualities of light. We become light-filled when we see clearly with the warmth of Love. We can then stand up and say "NO" without adding negativity to the world.

I think of the story I heard from an Aikido master, "imagine that your grandmother went crazy and began attacking with a knife. Of course you must do whatever is necessary to protect your life, her life and all other lives. But, and this is the most important - you do not harm her out of anger or fear. You do not do more than what is needed and as soon as possible you get her the help that she obviously needs. Imagine if we could approach our "enemies" with this clarity and warmth.

Humanity and Technology

In an often unseen, underappreciated way, our children and many of us adults are falling under the spell of the remarkably powerful, dehumanizing impact of misused technology. Our children are learning to be more comforted by images on screens than by flesh and blood. Cold replaces warmth as the homey hearth of humanity and cool logic becomes divorced from the helpful influence of "heart thinking". A steady diet of screen images and of virtual reality makes us susceptible to a devaluing of life. The virtual becomes more appealing than the real. We can see this in the nefarious influence of pornography on the brain. Similarly, imagine the effect of drone

warfare on the warriors sitting at desks thousands of miles away from the effects of their missiles.

The problem is not the technology, it is the way our brains are vulnerable to the seductive, mechanical forces that overtake us. I can sense it in myself with checking my email, if I am not careful. Does it seem strange to speak about technology in the same breath as Auschwitz, dehumanization and forces of evil? I sense an important connection. We are in a battle for the True Human Being and this is one of the places that the loss of humanity is occurring. It is up to us, you and me, to stand up for the re-humanization of our world.

Genocide is implicitly inhuman. The desire to destroy a people requires an objectification of all people. In objectifying others, we objectify ourselves. It is shocking to realize that the Nazi's were so icily efficient that they realized more than half their nightmarish dream: of the estimated 11 million Jews in Central Europe, 6 million were killed! Seeing this potential in people who, at the core, are just like you and me demands from us a vigilance, a deep commitment, a VOW to stand up for life. The famous statement by George Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" is deeply with me.

Authenticating Human Experience: a Conversation with Gene Gendlin

The lessons living in me at this moment will likely continue to grow. I keep listening deeply to the "voices of the soil" and how they live in my heart, my mind, my belly, and my connections with the outer world. I am grateful to the Zen Peacemakers and to Bernie Glassman for creating this opportunity. Without the community of like-minded seekers, my experience would be impossible. We need each other to go deeply into our human experience of being alive.

My first day home I called my good friend Gene Gendlin. Gene, psychotherapist, philosopher and developer of "Focusing" is 89 and as a child was forced to leave his home in Vienna by the Nazi's. His family narrowly escaped from Austria, eventually coming to the United States. This portion of my dialogue with Gene is important for "what remains".

Gene: "I do not understand why you would go there deliberately, I never would"

Me: "I think my life has been so easy compared to yours. You already experienced this horror by necessity, I needed to experience it by choice.

Gene: "I still don't understand."

Me: "There is something about the inhumanity, the coldness..... something about this seems central to my whole purpose in being alive and in being here at Auschwitz This inhumanity, this desire to destroy life..... I need to understand this, to somehow relate to it..... To find room in my heart for all this seems very important, even essential..... I don't know why yet but it seems absolutely true (a big breath).

Gene: (taking time)- "I can see that but I am still a step away from choosing to go there".

Me: (long pause): "there is something in me that fights against the concept of evil..... I know that hurting people often hurt others, that most child molesters were molested. This is clear. I usually

can understand how individual pain leads to harmful actions..... It is the systemic dehumanization, that part of us that relishes in the killing and causing pain that does not compute..... I need a moment to feel into this..... wait a minute..... my stomach tightens, a real sickening sensation..... Wait..... I get it intellectually I just cannot really “get it” in my guts, no, no, it is reversed, I get it in my belly but can not understand it.....yes that is more right..... I am just starting to get, to sense into the evil of it all.....this incomprehensible yet real desire to destroy humanity, I can sense it even as I cannot understand it..... I needed to be in the environment to start to really take it in, to feel personally connected to it..... This is the truth, going there helps me to get that this evil is a real force, though perhaps an incomprehensible one that is living in us and around us.....there that’s it” (my belly releases).

Gene: “so being there you could really feel it. That makes sense to me, still to put yourself through that.....”

Me: “Gene, I see it clearly now- the essence of the gift you bring into this world with Focusing and felt sensing AND the center of my life through The Embodied Life teachings are an antidote to this dehumanization. That is it. That is the center. This is the larger purpose of our work. *We are both devoted to validating the authentically felt human experience of being alive and to affirming the bodily-felt reality of life as it is experienced on the inside of flesh and blood human beings. This is re-humanization and is the opposite of dehumanization!* It comes from our hearts and bellies and heads all working together in connection with other beings. When this gets lost, we are finished on this planet”.

Gene: “Amen”.