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Trauma and Hope

Healing a Collective Existential Crisis

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Abstract

What distinguishes the suicidal despair of a trauma victim like Primo Levi from Viktor Frankl, who retained a sense of hope? Both were Holocaust survivors. Both concede there's something wrong with "the world." But is this, as Frankl claims, merely a temporary anomaly in the stability of opposing forces of good and evil or life and death drives? Or is it, as Levi claims, symptomatic of a moral de-evolution comparable to the end stage of a terminal illness destroying humanity from the inside out? In view of the Holocaust, and 75 million other atrocities committed in the last century, is hope for humanity naïve? The practical significance for psychotherapy, then, lies in the extent to which what we call pathology – including "normal neuroses" – may be symptomatic of this foundational problem.

Our aim here is to rely on our own therapeutic professions of authenticity, empathy, and positive regard to enter into Levi's world, and others like him, and see through their eyes. In doing so, the character of our own faith and hope will be put to the test as we discover to what extent Levi's claim is true. As we shall see, this does not entail succumbing to Levi's despair. *Testifying* to a life-threatening disease is one thing; *believing* it is terminal is another. And a door to hope opens as we realize that none of us can avoid a faith commitment, and the character of that commitment determines our prospects for hope: Awakening to a "cold-indifferent" world is not awakening to a value-neutral reality, but to a reality permeated by objectively values. And, as we begin to realize deceit presupposes the truth it distorts, and evil presupposes the good it turns away from, so too a moral de-evolution presupposes a moral evolution that can transform the human heart. The realization that faith evolves by insight can enable therapists to go beyond empathizing with trauma victims like Levi by showing them there is a reason for hope.

Trauma and Hope: Toward Healing a Collective Existential Crisis

An illustration of our general problem and its solution

I will remind you of an innocent and ancient story, of a king and his new clothes . . . Tailors deceived a king, telling them they would weave him a wonderful suit which would be invisible to any but good men . . . In the end the naked king paraded out into the street where all the people were gathered to admire his suit of clothes, and all did admire it until a child dared to point out that the king was naked . . . Have you and I forgotten that our vocation, as innocent bystanders – and the very condition of our terrible innocence – is to do what the child did, and keep on saying the king is naked, at the cost of being condemned criminals? Remember, . . . if the child had not been there, they would all have been madmen, or criminals. *It was the child's cry that saved them* (Italics mine. Merton, 1966).

On the mark of a true witness

Even the worst among us appeals to good faith or speaks in the name of truth and goodness. They could hardly convince themselves much less anyone else if they did otherwise. *Authentic* good faith, however, appeals to a real versus feigned relation to known truth. It implies experiential insight as well as sincerity. An attitude or orientation of good faith, then, is an evolution of good faith resulting in devotion to the truth. A child may sincerely believe many things, which are nevertheless false. A well-meaning surgeon may still kill our child if she lacks the necessary knowledge and skill to affect a cure. Similarly, the mark of the true witness in us as well as anyone else is both sincerity and fullness of insight (Wyner, 1988; 2007a; Blevis, 2004, p. 755). Our aim, therefore, is to look through the eyes of the most sincere and insightful witnesses of the Holocaust as a lens to evaluate our prospects of hope (Levi, 1984, p.18). In so

doing, we intend to show that although true peace or psycho-spiritual health is not attainable by directly seeking it, by directing our faith to a “good” worthy of our wholehearted trust and love it can be attained as a gift (Frankl, 1960; Maslow, 1982, p. 39). The unique power of “religion” over human life – for evil as well as good – may then be seen to turn on distinguishing the one true God from any and every idol.

The testimony of the Holocaust witnesses to an unprecedented collective moral crisis

Primo Levi was an atheist and Elie Wiesel is a believer; yet as Holocaust witnesses they are unified in an indictment that extends far beyond any previous indictment of human selfishness and denial that the witnesses in every age testified against and endured great sacrifice to overcome. From the innermost depths of their hearts they cry out as if the whole human project has proven itself a complete failure. The very ground that serves to orient and give meaningful direction, purpose, and value for our lives has been shaken to its core by doubt. They point to the last stages of a moral plague, as if a bad seed had rooted itself in the very essence of being human and woven itself into the very fabric of reality and any possible God at its core (Wiesel, 1958, pp. 42-44; Amery, 1980, p. 100; Wiesel & O’Conner, 1990, p. 69; Stein, 2002, p. 207).

Why psychotherapy must go beyond ideas, beliefs, and feelings to deal with reality itself

What do these witnesses see and what do they merely believe? What do we see and what do we merely believe? The spirit of the true witness speaking in and to each of us may confirm their testimony about a global moral or spiritual crisis (we use these terms interchangeably and *define* spirit as disembodied personal power), but their belief about its implications regarding God and our prospects for hope remains in question. Indeed, their ambivalence on this last question is manifested symptomatically by the mere fact we have not succumbed to Levi’s

suicidal despair (Levi, 1984, p.14). Our survival may only indicate either real ignorance or more or less subtle forms of denial (Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Silver, 2000; Broderick & Blewitt, 2006, pp. 489-491). But, how can psychotherapy, insofar as it limits its discipline to mere ideas, beliefs, and feelings divorced from objective knowledge, resolve this crisis? Healing necessitates that we be reconciled to the truth. As Viktor Frankl claims, the primary need of humanity today is to awaken from our moral slumber to the voice of *The Unconscious God* asking each of us, “What is the meaning of your life?” A call that none of us in our freedom and *response*-ability can evade or be indifferent to (Frankl, 1975, pp.23-24; Frankl, 1992, 1975, 1969, 1967, 1966; Tweedie, 1961; see also, Marcus & Rosenberg (1995), Staub, 2003, p.10, May (1984).

On the root of our moral weakness

In Bettelheim’s landmark study of extreme situations like the Holocaust he asks, “Why, then – and this is the question that haunts all who study the extermination camps – why then did millions walk quietly, without resistance, to their death?” (Bettelheim, 1960, p. 264; Bettelheim, 1979; see also Levi’s response, 1984, p.19). Putting aside the many facets of what Des Pres (1979) calls “The Bettelheim Problem,” suffice it to say that the victims in the death camps found themselves so reduced to an animal level that their survival tended to be elevated even above parental instincts to sacrifice themselves for their children. A pyramid of bodies in a gas chamber with children on the bottom of the pile and the strongest adults at the top, paints only one of many very graphic and disturbing portraits (Muller, 1979, p.17; Nyiszli, 1960, p.52). It is hardly a testimony to true martyrdom – the voluntary laying down of one’s life for a truly noble cause. But it is also not an attempt to “blame the victim.” Our question is not *whether* the Jewish victims in the death camps were so degraded, but the causes in back of it and its practical significance for us. For, the problem here reaches deeper than physical and psychological

suffering to include spiritual suffering – personal degradation, cruelty, malevolence, *evil*. Abilities no animal is capable of. Primo Levi, for example, refers to “the senseless cruelty of killing children before their mothers’ eyes . . . a process of brutalization, with the precise objective of demoralizing the human in man before killing him. And I believe that even in this bloody history of our humanity, this is something unique” (Levi, 2005, pp. 118-119. See also: Marcus & Rosenberg, 1995, p. 92; Des Pres, 1976; Sodi, 1987, pp. 362-363; Levi, 2005, pp. 118-119).

Moral freedom and power in even the worst conditions

Yet, even the most extreme form of spiritual degradation may limit without eliminating our freedom and responsibility to act in accordance with the knowledge and power we actually have. The most abused child is not *compelled* to become an abuser (Stein, 2002, p. 212). In the generation of evil, just as in the generation of good, one finds one’s self time and time again at a crossroads where one must choose whether one will cross a present moral boundary line. In Levi’s words, “We are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to certain death, but we still possess one power and we must defend it with all our strength for it is the last – the power to refuse our consent” (Levi, 1959, p. 36. See also Fisher, 1992, p. 601). This, I believe, is one of Frankl’s main points, and it provides an initial and partial response to Bettelheim’s query about the behavior of the victims in the extermination camps, and, by extension, each and every one of us (Frankl, 1992, p. 132). The behavior of the victims of the Holocaust cannot be judged by our moral standards in conditions far less extreme than theirs.

In what sense this existential crisis has evolved

The significance of the Holocaust for us turns on *our* failing to heed the warning the Holocaust has for us all. For if we dig deeper in evaluating the despair of Levi and other reliable

Holocaust witnesses, we may observe that the primary cause of his despair decades later was not limited to what he suffered at the hands of his Nazi perpetrators; nor limited to a coldly indifferent world sixty years ago. Rather, it revolved around *our* failure to heed the warning that that event, along with the 75 million atrocities that have followed in its train, has for us (McCord,1995), Dudai, 2002, Sodi,1987), Stille, 1987), Titelman, 2006). This is why that event became the pivot around which his life turned. Not a pivot centered on any isolated traumatic event that any individual or group may suffer within an otherwise progressively healthy life, but one inseparably connected to a global spiritual condition he could not let go of because the danger has only become worse (Amery, 1980, p. xi. See McCord, 1995, for a study of Levi, Amery, Celan and other such witnesses). For, just as children are influenced (not compelled) to become abusers if raised by abusive care-givers, so too an abusive or spiritually fragmented global culture negatively influences us all. Groups are certainly as susceptible to self-centered agendas as the individuals who make them up (Staub, 1995, pp.64ff) without this implying collective guilt (Frankl, 1997, pp. 102ff). And two of the primary ways in which we try to evade our responsibility is by passing it off to the leaders of our in-group (Staub, 1985) while pinning the blame on the most convenient scapegoat. Hitler, for example, could hardly have conceived, much less implemented, his *Final Solution* without a step-by-step testing of the waters of the world's cold-indifference toward the Jews (Hilberg, 1971). As Hitler put it in the German Press in 1939, "It is a shameful example to observe today how the entire democratic world dissolves in tears of pity but then, in spite of its obvious duty to help, closes its heart to the poor, tortured Jewish people" (Hilberg, 1961, p. 259; see also Fromm, 1973, pp. 403; 422 ff.).

Are religious believers exceptions from a morally compromised world?

Unlike similar indictments of humanity by the great religious witnesses of our past, Primo Levi, Jean Amery and other atheist witnesses of the Holocaust don't appeal to *any* group in our world today as exceptions to this rule. The significance of the claim by believers to be such exceptions, therefore, does not revolve around the tendency of other atheists to point to collective denial via religious blind and bad faith as if it was the only impediment to an otherwise morally healthy secular world. It revolves around an almost universally felt need for *some* kind of moral exception to effectively or therapeutically deal with this global crisis. But given that religion alone appeals to a moral evolution or a providential victory of good over evil, what are we to make of the apparent absence of moral power in the lives of believers during the Holocaust and, more pervasively, among believers today (Levi, 1984, p.14; Levi, 1959, p. 118)?

On the necessity of believers to claim to be exceptions & the question of what they mean

Both atheists and believers appeal to good faith, or their faith in true goodness, as the only foundation of a true hope, but religious believers alone, by definition and historical example, claim to be exceptions to a morally compromised world. Yet, what precisely do modern believers mean by this? As Gandhi said in reaction to Christian claims that it is impossible to live without sin in this life, "If this be the Christianity acknowledged by all Christians, I cannot accept it. I do not seek redemption from the consequences of my sin. I seek to be redeemed from sin itself, or rather from the very thought of sin" (Gandhi, 1989, p.104).

Why religion must claim an essential connection to a self-transcendent spiritual reality

Putting aside the controversies within every religious tradition regarding the meaning and attainability of moral or spiritual perfection in this life, every religion appeals to some form and measure of I/Thou experiential relationship to a God of truth and goodness to even presume to

speak with authority as humanity's moral teachers or guides. But, like the relationship between a child and one's parents, how can such a relationship fail to increasingly transform believers into the image of the "God" they embrace; all the more so Jews, Christians and Muslims who claim unique status as God's faithful, chosen, and saved (Buber & Goes, 1969, pp. 20-27; Wyner 1988, 2007a; 2007b)? It would seem that all of us – especially modern believers – are constrained to place God on trial or ourselves.

Why these atheist witnesses may better recognize the religious root of this moral problem

It is *this* claim of believers to be exceptions that the atheist witnesses of the Holocaust call in question. Their vantage point as atheists of good faith may especially enable them to bear witness to a moral emptiness, existential vacuum, or spiritual black hole that has engulfed what is called morality, religion, and spirituality today (Frankl, 1975, pp. 83-84; 90; Buber, 1999, p. 81). Frankl seems not to have fully grasped this deeper problem. For although he claims the faith of believers was deepened by their horrific experiences, why didn't *conscientious* atheists like Levi convert if the lives of believers demonstrated greater moral light, purity, and power (Frankl, 1975, p. 16; Amery, 1980, pp. 37-38; Levi, 1986b, p. 145)? But if the actual empirical condition of believers in the death camps did not provide any empirical proof that religion and moral power are even essentially connected (Gandhi, 1989, p.139) – if they saw no moral difference between atheists and believers inside or outside the camps – why wonder that they lost hope of a vision of truth that could have set them as well as us free?

On the difference between moral and social power

Levi concedes that as a group *religious* prisoners (and *political* prisoners) demonstrated a greater range of freedom and power to act in accordance with conventional moral standards of behavior than relatively isolated or unaffiliated individuals (Levi, 1986b. See also, Marcus &

Rosenberg, 1995, p.93). But religious fanatics also have “power” to endure suffering and “martyrdom” for their cause without this implying any connection to truth or goodness. *This* form of power, therefore, is mere social power: the power of the mob or a group as opposed to the power an individual may exert alone. It is akin to the felt need of a man in prison to choose a side or be victimized by all. By contrast, moral power is qualitatively different *in kind* from mere social power by virtue of its inseparable connection to or reliance upon the truth and goodness (See Buber, 1999, pp. 72ff. for a similar distinction). The moral power of an outcast Jesus, a solitary Jewish prophet, or a relatively small and isolated “chosen” people to permanently alter human moral history are examples of a power that emanates from the truth itself (Wyner, 1988; Wyner 2007a, 2007b).

Social and moral power are not essentially in conflict. The meaning of a spiritual community

Not that there is any inherent conflict between moral/spiritual and social power. Insofar as the love of truth becomes the governing principle of a group, a genuine spiritual community is born within which both the group and its members mutually empower one another. But like our constant need to breathe in air or the deepening fidelity and commitment characteristic of a truly healthy marriage, such a community can only be sustained by its continuous and evolving relationship to the truth. In a morally compromised world, however, this union is constantly being attacked from every side, and on a level often deeper than conscious will (Buber 1999, p.81; Staub, 1985, p. 82). And insofar as we yield our fidelity to this spirit to any other motive – even individual or group survival – the moral power of both the group and the individual who identify with it is diminished. A once spiritually oriented group can reverse direction, just as individuals can. What one calls one’s god and religion can become an idol like anything else. As Frankl, Laing, Assagioli and other existential psychotherapists have pointed out, even happiness,

self-actualization, and spiritual perfection cannot be ends in themselves (Laing, 1960; Assagioli, 1965). It is only by seeking something greater than ourselves that fulfillment comes as a gift (Frankl, 1960; Frankl, 1975, pp. 78-85, 139; see also, Maslow, 1966, p. 111; Buber, 1999, pp. 15, 85). In short, no one can avoid faith in some type of god or supreme object of trust. The only question is what type of god *do* we already trust and what type of god *will* we place our trust in?

Why religious idolatry is the primary barrier to a truly religious life

A morally compromised world, then, refers to an evolution of an inversion of value priorities that becomes systemic on a global scale. A world that may even come to regard what Gandhi called perfection as a pathological utopian ideal while pathological selfishness may be increasingly regarded as normal – and, therefore, healthy. Altruism may be reduced to healing for the satisfaction it provides the healer rather than truly unselfish giving without regard to any compensation it may provide. The most conscientious examples in our history begin to appear suspect or at least powerless to counteract the deadly course of this “disease.” There is a “complete reversal of morality . . . so that the murder of some human beings becomes what is morally good, a service to humanity” (Staub, 1985, p.77). All of us then begin to cry out, How can anyone believe in a God after the Holocaust (Anissimov, 1996, p.182; Levi, 1984, p. 14)?

On the spirit versus the culture of religion

And yet, if and as we are willing and able to step outside our in-group secular and religious cultures and shift our attention instead to the incarnation of a self-transcendent God of truth in the lives of the best witnesses in our history – that is, witnesses who testify of a perfect God, incapable of evil –we are constrained to ask, How could the believer, Elie Wiesel or the atheist, Primo Levi – even the Martin Buber of “I and Thou” who fed daily on the Gospels – believe in a God capable of evil unless it was handed down to them by a Jewish culture that had

lost sight of its spiritual roots (Laing, 1985, pp. 128-129)? How could those Christians who told Gandhi it was impossible not to sin, as if evil was rooted in our genes (Stein, 2002, p. 207), believe such a thing unless it was handed down to them by a Christian culture that had explained away the call “to be perfect, as your father in heaven is perfect?” At the very least, the universal call of every religious group today to “return to tradition” bears witness to a universally felt lack of the spirit that once inspired our most reliable witnesses. Why wonder, therefore, that Wiesel felt revulsion in reciting the *Kaddish*, the prayer for the dead, as he watched the bodies of Jewish children go up in smoke? What was he to thank such a “god” for (Wiesel, 1958, p. 43)?

The psychotherapeutic need for a God that can speak to the human heart or conscience

Frankl’s spiritual instinct is right on target here. We need a God who is believable or worthy of any conscientious person’s trust (Frankl, 1975, pp.14-15). We need theodicies that make sense. For example, if believers today think of God as omnipotent in an unqualified sense, then they will be constrained to hold God guilty of sins of omission if not commission for allowing evil to exist at all. But, how is omnipotence in this sense consistent with human freedom and responsibility? Certainly the mere creation of finite beings *capable* of moral freedom and responsibility (for good as well as evil) implies no necessity to lie, sin, or do what we know is wrong. So, where did this pervasively accepted idea of the necessity of evil come from? Isn’t holding God responsible for the abuse of our freedom akin to holding even the best parents responsible for their child’s decision to do what the child knows is wrong?

“What about the suffering of the innocent and the just?” Again, where did the idea come from that equates pain with evil and suffering with punishment? Just imagine what life would be like if we were unable to feel pain. We would be unable to distinguish what can hurt us from what is for our welfare. Nor does mere suffering injustice make the victim unjust. It cannot stain

the victim's conscience. Even death does not imply evil or injustice unless one assumes there is no possibility of a spiritual life beyond the grave.

Toward a God, religion, and psychotherapy of the heart or conscience

A more reliable conception of providence, then, appeals to a self-transcendent or supra-personal God whose omnipotence is self-constrained by her willingness to share her life with us. She cannot magically erase our sins, nor the indelible stain sin causes, but she is willing and able to forgive us by helping us become responsible moral agents. This free offer of grace then places the responsibility on us to turn from a relationship to an "it," whether in the form of an indifferent moral law or a tribal god we can manipulate to serve our own self-agendas, to a "person" who alone makes forgiveness, reconciliation, and moral transformation possible.

In what sense an atheist of good faith may be more of a true believer than most believers today

A true believer is not a believer because one believes a God exists, but because one entrusts one's self to that spirit of truth we all profess to serve and who is, whether we are conscious of this or not, the voice of God speaking in and to our hearts (Frankl, 1975). Such a God is incapable of deceiving us. And by virtue of our continued fidelity, cannot fail to increasingly reveal herself to us as she really is and, in so doing, transform us into her image. The natural consequence of such a life of faith is *moral* perfection – the ability to love the truth and what is truly and supremely good with all our hearts. We then do what is good out of love for what is good rather than out of obedience to any mere law. As Frankl put it, "the goal of therapy . . . is to convert an unconscious *potentia* into a conscious *actus* . . . to restore it eventually as an unconscious *habitus* (Frankl, 1975, p. 38). The life of such a believer, then, provides all the empirical proof a conscientious person needs to believe in the providence of a

God actively working to redeem humanity. In a word, the empirical life of a true believer is testimony to a life of moral *power*.

The practical problem of a moral de-evolution blocking our way to hope

But even if we concede that the scriptural witnesses provide empirical proof of the existence and goodness of God, if believers today manifest no more of this power than a sincere atheist, what empirical proof do we have to believe in such a providence? All the more so in view of the *testimony* of our modern atheist witnesses of a moral de-evolution working in the opposite direction? This is no eternal moral equilibrium between Freudian life drives and death drives, but the symptoms of a psychospiritual disease culminating in a progressive loss of *moral* power to even think, much less act, rightly (Buber, 1999, p. 81). Our moral apathy and psychopathology is becoming more and more natural and normal for us, increasingly fragmenting our minds, malforming our brain chemistry, compromising our immune system, splitting every interpersonal bond, and polluting the material world in which we live. Nevertheless, the point of contention here may not be the superficial battle between the believer's faith and the atheist's reason, but the sense in which what we call reason and faith may both be serving the same idol.

Overcoming the psychotherapeutic barriers to a solution

How can psychotherapy help us deal with this problem if it denies a moral or spiritual reality (Frankl, 1975, p. 21; Buber, 1999, p.113; pp. 35-39)? How can even religious oriented existential psychotherapies and recent mainstream psychiatric acknowledgement of the therapeutic value of religion (Marcus & Rosenberg, 1995, pp. 101-102) help us deal with this problem insofar as they arbitrarily restrict this experience, as Jung did, to mere ideas or psychical contents? How do we distinguish such true core therapeutic values as authenticity, empathy,

hope, and altruism from their counterfeits (Buber, 1999, pp. 51-52; 68-70)? As Buber put it, the inauthentic person, “produces a look which is meant to have, and often enough does have, the effect of a spontaneous utterance” (Buber, 1999, p. 76). We must ask ourselves, “to what extent does this apply to psychotherapy today? To what extent are we governed more by the appearance of authenticity, empathy, and positive regard than by the reality? How can psychotherapy help us deal with such a global spiritual crisis if and as it assumes that real and substantial spiritual change is not possible for the vast majority of us?”

Value of a phenomenological approach that appeals to experience of “the things themselves”

Despite its own shortcomings in providing such a global solution, the *Logotherapy* of Viktor Frankl at least offers a constructive alternative by asking us to return to the empirical or phenomenological moral facts we all experience, rather than allowing our theories and prejudices call them in question. As William James put it, “Science only stands for a method and for no fixed belief . . . The verdict of pure insanity, of gratuitous preference for error, of superstition without an excuse, which the scientists of our day are led by their training to pronounce upon the entire thought of the past, is a most shallow verdict” (James, 1960, pp. 44-45). Are we not all conscious of some difference between truth and deception; good and evil? The realization that none of us can avoid a faith commitment in response to known truth – that even indecision is a choice – provides the only foundation for a cure to our spiritual crisis. But if we are to overcome the prejudices in high places that block our way to hope, we must go far beyond a religious pluralism or common moral denominator (Wyner, 1988; Wyner, 2007; Staub, 2003, p. 15; Stein, 2002, p. 215). For, if the most reliable witnesses among us are overcome by despair than what of the rest of us? How can *we* solve this problem? The answer may be a lot closer than we believe:

we can't solve it. But this does not mean there is not someone – a self-transcendent reality – who can.

Forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation in an unjust world

A child who suffers *an episode* of extreme abuse at his father's hands may still retain hope. He may still transcend his suffering in the growing realization that there is, after all, something worth living for. Even the most extreme experience of degradation may be diminished in its *relative* influence on one's life as a whole *over the course of time* (Fisher, 1992, p. 600). This, I believe, is Frankl's main point in all his works. But, it is *not* an issue of any mere passing of time – as if time in and of itself could heal anything – much less “heal all wounds.” As any perpetrator knows, one may rely on time as a means to place greater distance between one's crimes and one's awareness of them (Staub, 2003, p. 13). Indeed, to avoid a convicted conscience the perpetrator *must* bend every effort to influence the victim to forgive and forget by using any form of rationalization possible. For, in just the degree one acknowledges the victim as a victim one convicts one's self as a perpetrator.

The role of time in the realization of a true hope

Time, therefore, only plays a positive role within a process of sincere *confession* of real guilt, as opposed to mere guilt feelings (Buber, 1999, pp. 110 ff). It necessarily results in real pain and awareness of real loss, which brings with it real *conviction*, which alone makes real peace possible. It is this that underlies any *genuine* plea to “forgive and forget.” But this is only possible in direct proportion to the perpetrator's willingness to see the truth of what he has done as if it was done to him. It is only possible if and as the perpetrator empathically opens his heart to the victim as a person like himself. It is only possible as the perpetrator immerses himself in that loving light and burning fire that calls out to him despite his repressed shame and self-

loathing. Only then does the perpetrator stand *with* the victim and see himself through the victim's eyes. Only then do both perpetrator and victim see each other through the eyes of one and the same God (Staub, 2003, pp. 13 ff). Only then does the victim become part of the flesh of the perpetrator's own flesh so that the great gap between them exists no more (Stein, 2002, p. 214). Such a faith in a self-transcendent reality as this necessarily changes us (Buber, 1999), and it has the power to overcome even prejudice on a global scale (Staub, 2003, p. 18; Wyner 2007; Wyner 1988).

Not even a God can grant peace on any other terms, and only those seeking to justify themselves by appeal to cheap grace would condemn a victim for being unwilling to "forgive and forget." As Levi says, "I am not inclined to forgive. I never forgave our enemies of that time . . . because I know no human act that can erase a crime" (Levi, 1986b, p. 137; Anissimov, 1996, pp. 354-355). How can he forgive and forget if he sees no evidence of real confession or acknowledgement by his perpetrators of their crimes? How can he forgive and forget if he sees no acknowledgement of our crimes? For, we demand of him and other victims not "to judge" their perpetrators so that we can be relieved of our own guilt for our own distance from the truth. And, the victim's refusal forces *us* into the dilemma of condemning them or ourselves. We then aggravate their wound by treating them as if they are cold hearted, full of resentment, stubbornly rebellious against mercy. We place them on trial instead of their perpetrators or ourselves. And it is our failure to respond to their cry – to wake up and heed their compassionate warning – that finally rips from their heart their last remnant of hope.

Conclusion

An unprecedented moral crisis implies a call to an equally unprecedented renaissance of hope. But, only if we heed the warning in time. In Levi's last book before his alleged suicide

(Gambetta, 1999) he responds to the question, “whether Auschwitz will return.” He acknowledges the seriousness of a problem far more pervasive than the Jewish genocide, makes no explicit prophetic claims about it, and seems to keep a door of hope open. Yet, in that book he speaks of a vaster shame: “the shame of the world” (Levi, 1986b, p. 117), and perhaps enough has been said to motivate conscientious readers to consider whether Levi’s reoccurring nightmare applies to us: that the death camp that had assimilated Europe and even the hope of a new Israel has now assimilated the world, and that it is this that drove him along with many of the most sensitive among us to despair and the rest of us into denial. “We tend to forget “that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is closed, that beyond the enclosure stands the lords of death, and the trains are waiting only a little further on” (Levi, 1984; see also, Amery, 1980, pp. 86-87, 99; Borowski in Langer, 1995, p. 342; Celan in Langer, 1995, pp. 599-600; Langer, 1995, p.120).

We are all on common ground – atheists and believers alike – and our only hope lies in our awakening to the fact that none of us can avoid taking a stand. Not just in the beginning, but also at every point in our journey up to our last moment in this life. Every stage has its trials to overcome and, like Lot’s wife, to turn back at any point along the way is to dry up like a pillar of sand. But through it all perhaps all we need to remember is that what we most trust or love makes us one with it. If we are truly led by the spirit of truth and love we shall see for ourselves that all our doubts about God and the meaning, purpose, and value of life are rooted in nothing more than prejudice. All its power over us lies solely in appearance. So, all we need do to overcome it in ourselves and in all our interpersonal relationships – even on a global scale – is to open our eyes, and refuse to shut them, just as the child did in the story of the King and his invisible suit of clothes.

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