Facing the Pain: Learning from the Power of Witnessing the Holocaust

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Facing the Pain, facing the truths of the Holocaust, facing excruciating external and internal knowledge of genocide—truly impossible, shattering of meaning and language—I actually am refusing to make a complete sentence about it, there is no combination of noun and verb that is adequate.

And yet, the Power of Witnessing, the process that develops between a receiver and a giver of testimony re-connects some of what has broken. Micro-communications, conscious and deeply unconscious signal “I am with you” Witnessing moves back and forth—in witnessing the one witnessing is also open to the witnessing of the other. When witnessing is functioning to touch the Holocaust, to take it in, and when witnessing is functioning in psychoanalysis, a living mind can be born. A space for creating takes hold. Everyone who witnesses will feel on the brink of disaster, (survivors, 2nd generation, 3rd generation, and all who witness, now and in the future). The Holocaust, all the murder, torture, insanity, negation of humanity, puts a dead place into the mind. It is solid like cement -- frozen and on fire. Werner Bohleber (2010) points out that we need to resort to metaphor when attempting to knit together meaning when it is so thoroughly disrupted. There is tremendous psychic risk when facing the pain. It hurts so
much. Grief is as large as the Milky Way and each star represents a mournful place. When in contact with the Power of Witnessing a living mind accompanies grief and trauma. Witnessing breaks through the dense dark treacherous paths to the edge the dead places of trauma allowing some new growth with narrative, building of monuments, and lasting conversations, internal and with others.

One day Nina Shapiro Perl (who wrote about the artwork of Esther Krinitz) and Marilyn and I were meeting to talk about the book and were in wonderment together that there was so much interest and excitement. I said I thought we were creating an Anti-Train; a force fighting against the shut-down that can take place when looking at the Holocaust.

On January 20, 1942 senior officials of the Nazi Regime met at a beautiful mansion in Wansee for a luncheon. There was delicious food and special wines and they signed a document to implement the Final Solution, the murder of all Jews – men, women, children, and infants. Trains were the way to bring about the disaster. Allowing the Nazi Train into ones mind becomes searing. You want to grab you head and scream. There is a need for the Anti-Train, a holding/containing space where others are willing to “be with” no matter what.

The witnessing environment of this train car allows room to feel and fosters a capacity to take in the genocide that took place outside the windows and now is
in one’s mind. The space within the anti-train allows one to think and feel about the Holocaust and the special place of being a witness both to others and to one’s own psychic resonances of trauma.

My imagined Anti-Train (please join me and develop your own) is elegant and comfortable with high back chairs and soft light shining through creamy etched crystal fixtures and lamps. The interior of my Anti-Train has dark wood, shiny brass, velvet, and thick carpet. The sound of the train moving along the tracks is rhythmic and soothing with an occasional low whistle sound being emitted. This is an idealized train for sure, probably inspired from 1940’s film and perhaps from picking up a relative at the Chicago Union Station or a trip to grandparents in Miami and memories of hearing distant freight trains from my childhood windows. It stays in my mind in opposition to newsreel footage of transports which carried Jews to their deaths. I am certain that these Nazi trains were placed in my mind in childhood and existed in the minds of my Jewish parents and my society often to be disavowed, denied, and felt as shameful.

As I researched the Nazi Trains, I felt like I went under, nightmares, crying and I felt held by Marilyn, Dori, Henri, Arlene, Arnie and Raquel (we are in an enactment group together and she told me to “take care”. Perhaps, you have to go under to witness. But then I found writing that was so remarkable that I felt accompanied. The historian Sir Martin Gilbert has a book titled: Final Journey:
The Fate of the Jews in Nazi Germany in which he documents details of transports carrying men, women, children, and babies to their deaths. In his words: “I have tried to tell the stories of individuals, as well as of communities. . . . the story of the Nazi attempt to murder the Jews of Europe concerned individual people with names, families, careers and futures, for millions of whom no one survived to mourn, or to remember. (p. 7)” I discovered the writings of Charlotte Delbo, a French resistance fighter, who writes poetry that oscillates between the anti-train and then the Nazi train. Here is just one sentence (you will want to read her): There is a little girl that holds her doll against her chest, (so ordinary)–dolls can be smothered too. Her writing is a gift.

And Primo Levi, the Italian chemist, who was taken to Auschwitz is an exquisite and inspiring writer. Here are a few lines from his description of his transport in February, 1944.

But on the morning of the 21st we learned that on the following day the Jews would be leaving. All the Jews, without exception. Even the children, even the old, even the ill.

And night came, and it was such a night that one knew that human eyes would not witness it and survive.

He describes the end of the journey in this way:
In less than ten minutes all the fit men had been collected together in a group. What happened to the others, to the women, to the children, to the old men, we could establish neither then nor later; the night swallowed them up, purely and simply . . .

Levi tells us that “human eyes would not witness it and survive:. And yet, he witnesses and in doing so gives us more space on the Anti-Train where we too gain the courage to witness finding ways to Face the Pain and continue developing witnessing for our patients, ourselves, and our communities.