

Bearing Witness to the Impossible and Unfathomable* **Russell Delman October 2015**

Before going to Rwanda with the Zen Peacemakers in 2014 for the twentieth commemoration of that country's incomprehensible genocide, I immersed myself in many books with divergent depictions of the events and their causes. Still, when standing on the actual soil that witnessed these brutalities and meeting perpetrators as well as surviving victims, I see now that preparation was both necessary and impossible.

Next week, I travel with the Zen Peacemakers for a "Bearing Witness Retreat" to Auschwitz and Birkenau, places of devastation that were dedicated to the annihilation of humanness. Similar to the visit to Rwanda and the Street Retreat that I wrote about last year, the intentions of these events emanate from the three tenets of the Zen Peacemakers: "not-knowing" (entering a situation with an open mind and heart), "bearing witness" (opening to the sorrow and joy living in that situation) and "right action" (doing the appropriate, life-affirming actions that arise from not-knowing and bearing witness).

Again, I am preparing by reading many accounts from diverse perspectives, knowing that preparation is impossible. One of my favorite Zen sayings is "because it is impossible, we do it". These retreats are not a naive attempt at fixing, understanding or even some kind of intentional healing. Rather, bearing witness from the ground of not-knowing means holding the intention to be present for what lives in and around us when engaging wholeheartedly on the land and in the stories that arise from these places.

What leads some human beings - people like you and me - to revel in destroying life and the dehumanization of others? What leads other people to survive in unbearable conditions, some to give up because it is just too much to bear, and still others to find the cunning or wickedness to get by? I know that all of these responses potentially live in me and the roots of these actions live in all of us.

Part of my learning is to see through these extreme examples how human beings create categories of worthiness and unworthiness and see how we all, in much more subtle ways, can close our hearts and perpetuate mental violence toward others and ourselves. Our habits of destructive judgements arise from the same "dominance system" that thrives in so many of our world cultures.

Who is unworthy of our caring?

Who or what do we cast out of our hearts?

For some it is women, for some it is men. For others, criminals, police, drug addicts or homeless people. What about CEO's, republicans, democrats or transgender people? How do we create effective personal boundaries, speak up against life's unacceptable behavior AND, simultaneously, be a force of unconditional, radiant love into our world?

When we see deeply, there is no THEM - only US. There is really only US. Just as the right hand won't intentionally hurt the left, the experience of interconnectivity naturally brings forward goodwill, forgiveness, understanding AND standing up for life. We neither choose passive acceptance nor do we demonize others. We do not accept the polluting actions of some corporate executives yet we do not create hatred either. Seeing clearly with an open, at times broken heart, we can move toward life-affirming action. To me, this is a central and incredibly challenging task of our collective awakening.

Please join me in your heart, your prayers and meditations from November 2-8 for this "Bearing Witness Retreat".

*For my European friends:

"Bearing" has the sense of "tolerating or living with". To "bear our pain" is to somehow carry it, without denying it or being overwhelmed by it. To witness is to be present for. In The Embodied Life work we call this "presencing".

Unfathomable means unimaginable.