

## The Embodied Life™ School Freedom through Awareness



### **Second letter from the Zen Peacemaker Auschwitz-Birkenau Retreat: “Embodied Reflections”**

Dear Friends,

Arriving at Auschwitz this year is so new. I know the buildings and the atmosphere yet, the actual felt-experience is very different from my powerful experience last year. Knowing the basic layout, the astounding immensity of the place, it is so big, and having an orientation to the social/physical setting allows my process to go deeper. It is as if the need to "take it all in" is gone and now it is my bodily responses that is in the foreground of my experiencing.

The trees are beautiful with yellow leaves falling as the days shorten. Nature does not seem to care what happened here. I have the thought that the earth cries, but actually I don't know if that is true or just my story. The land seems so peaceful, the trees radiating stability and calm. Human malevolence could not halt the seasons, the urge to grow, the various expressions of beauty. We must remember this, honor this and give thanks for this reminder.

My first discovery after walking into the gas showers and crematorium is that disgust is stronger than grief. My belly grinds, there is an almost constant churning in my stomach. My body responds before any of the stories or information from the guides. My lips contort in an expression of distaste. Oddly, my heart seems strangely empty. This really surprises me. There is not room for sadness or grief or even rage- the sickening sense of disgust dominates.

Then I notice that my throat is contracted, a kind of gagging. Curiously, it is not that I am looking for these bodily sensations, they seem to arrive at the center of experience spontaneously. Seeing the bales of human hair, mostly women's, that is collected for various German industries to make fabric for uniforms and stuffing for pillows or the

thousands of eyeglasses and suitcases- gives context but all that is secondary to my bodily felt-sense.

Where is my heart? I keep noticing an absence in my chest. Belly and throat are clenched, my head is surprisingly clear and bright yet my chest feels empty and not effected. THIS gets clear in a moment of seeing pictures of people in ordinary life. Ahh- my heart needs individuals, not collectives masses of humanity nor thousands of remnants or pictures with so many people. The individual pictures taken from people's suitcases, not the official, head-shaved photos which are inhumane diminutions of the individual.

This person and that person are more real than 1,300,000 people killed. These wedding photos, families making music together, people enjoying life, smiling with an imagined, joyful future and then, suddenly, a tsunami of unimaginable suffering. Just like that! Regular folks enjoying life and then.....Now my heart is breaking open. There is a paradoxical, Talmudic teaching that sounds a lot like Zen- "the one life is of greater consequence than the many". Life is lived one person, one experience at a time. I am so grateful for the grounding sensations of my standing, feet on the floor and of THIS breath and the next otherwise the capacity for processing this would be completely overwhelmed.

During the afternoon meditations, we recite the names of people who died here. This also humanizes, personalizes. These families, often 10-20 from one place, the Adamczewski's from Osnitz or the Katz's from Abtau, lived life as unique individual humans, like you and me. Naming is so important!

In our Embodied Life retreats, we usually take the time for names. I see that even more importantly now. Whatever humans care about they name. In one incredibly efficient building, human beings with names, lives and hopes entered and then are stripped naked, deloused, shaved and, at the last stop, a number is tattooed on their arm. The person who entered that building is destroyed before they leave. The numbers on the skin are fascistic attempts to eliminate humanity. We must stand up for the individual!

Last night Yaser, a refugee from Syria, now living in Bern with his sister, "bore witness" to the crisis in his homeland. One person talking about the pain of burying his best friends or being able to save some children from starvation but not others or losing half his body weight from eating only grass and a little flour, pierces the heart even more than the 2000 killed in Aleppo. He was a dentist in Damascus until the war. Then he was needed in the hospital for emergency care, "no dentists needed with so many dying", he said. His greatest joy was saving a life or easing the pain of someone. These are real people like you and me. When I read about them in the newspaper, I am briefly touched yet I see now that my inner life maintains a distance. Unconsciously, the people I have not met seem less real than my friends and family. Perhaps this is a necessary distancing, at this moment, I am grateful for the direct connection.

The humanity of the people in the retreat is such a radical contrast to the inhumanity we are witnessing. We have "Listening Circles" where we share what is alive in us. Listening deeply to each other and to the land opens us to the best of humanity.

Like a candle lit in a dark room, the light is astounding. Here in the darkest expressions of humanity, created by people really just like us, comes the LOVE that lives at the core of each human being. This is our journey, here, there and wherever we are.

Can we be that light in the darkness?

Can we not turn away from the darkness and be lighthouses on rocky shores?

Here at Auschwitz I am tasting the destiny of our collective journey.

Without turning from the darkness, we affirm the light!

Thank you for your presence.....

Love.....Russell