

Two Strokes of Genius: The Miraculous Story of Marian Kolodziej and Bernie Glassman

(Third letter from the Zen Peacemaker Auschwitz-Birkenau Retreat)

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This Life!
Your destiny
Circles within circles
Don't miss it!

This remarkable, true story is actually four stories circling around each other.

Circling Around: First Story

Marian Kolodziej, was a renowned set designer for theater and cinema in Poland who died in 2013. He arrived on one of the first transports to Auschwitz as indicated by his low number, #432, and survived five years, a rare feat. For fifty years after liberation, he never spoke of his experience, not even to his devoted wife. In 1993, he suffered a severe stroke. In rehabilitation, a doctor suggested that he begin drawing to regain the use of his hand. At first, he strapped a small pencil to his fingers and worked on little pieces of paper. After sometime he began large, pen and ink drawings that became an unbelievably horrific, graphic, detailed and inspiring expression of his time in the camp. He says this is not art, not an exhibition- these are his words and memories in picture form, dedicated to all his friends who suffered and died in these camps.

Entering the basement of the Franciscan church which houses these paintings, I am bowled over, both repelled and enthralled by the potency of these detailed, precise images. Many are somewhat repetitive heads of the people he remembers- shaved heads, gaunt, with desperate eyes and piercing grimaces of emptiness and hopelessness. In a remarkable way, the occasional instances of light- of Christ, of Father Maximillian Kolbe, of the Tree of Life and the Eye of God- shine out with an intensity that is hard to describe. Such darkness, such suffering, such light! This is not naive hope. This is not "everything will be alright!". Such expressions would be an injustice to the travesty witnessed here and to the suffering. We must scream that everything is NOT alright and, of course, paradoxically know that it IS.

His stroke transformed his life. Seeing the detail, the enormous productivity, one wonders how he did all this in 16 years, much of it drawn lying prone on the ground. As he says, his life became consumed and devoted, he had a mission, a destiny, to stand up for his fellow prisoners and for humanity! The enormity of the horror is overwhelming, still we must not turn away. This "not turning away" from the paintings, means not turning away from Auschwitz, from other genocides, from the inhumanity that lives in our world today.

The expression of goodness, of light, within all of that brings authentic, realistic hope for our potential as HUMAN Beings. From the darkest imaginable aspects of humanity, which means any of us when we are desperately at the end of our rope (one never knows what we are capable of until pushed to such extremes), emerges this sense, this inkling, that love is stronger than any force in this universe.

Circling Around: Second Story

Bernie Glassman is a visionary Zen teacher who created the Zen Peacemaker Order after he experienced a vision of Hungry Ghosts. In Buddhism, Hungry Ghosts are Beings with very big bellies and needle thin throats who perpetually experience unquenchable desire. Forever hungry, forever thirsty, forever lost in wanting, these beings live in us and around us. From this insight, Bernie created various forms of social action to literally feed the hungry, house the homeless, care for those with AIDS and help people to experience our Oneness with the others. This last statement, that we are One with all Beings is the essence of Zen realization. Bernie is unique in that he took this experience of Oneness off the meditation cushion and into the world of suffering. He saw that spiritual awakening was incomplete without social action.

Upon coming to Auschwitz about 24 years ago, he heard the souls of the dead people here asking to be remembered. At first he was focused on the more than one million Jewish people killed here. After some time, he saw clearly that the cries included the German guards, the gypsies, gay and transgender people, political prisoners and others.

This is the 22nd Zen Peacemaker Retreat here, they also have had retreats in Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Lakota Reservations in South Dakota- places of genocide and extremely violent expressions of human ignorance. There is much more to say, please go to the Zen peacemaker web site to learn more.

About eight months ago Bernie had a stroke. Through excellent medical care, devoted assistants, Feldenkrais sessions and intense efforts he is recovering. He had the "impossible" goal of coming to this retreat. Through remarkable efforts, intentionality and Grace, he flew here this week. It was an enormous gift to be with Bernie.

Circling Around: Third Story

On the first night, Bernie told a remarkable story. When he first came here and saw the paintings of Marian Kolodziej, he was awed. Marian, greatly impaired by the stroke showed Bernie the pictures as they slowly walked together, Marian with a cane and wheel chair.

Marian explained that the stroke liberated something in him. Amazingly, he had no hatred but only love and forgiveness for the German people including the guards and camp commandant. His heart has free, his forgiveness complete. Bernie was so moved by this warm-hearted, incredibly kind human being. As Bernie said, until his death, Marian loved everybody!

Upon hearing about the first retreat that Bernie was creating, Marian wanted to be part of it. Each year, until his death in 2013, Marian would join the Peacemakers. His wife said that he looked forward all year to this event. Bernie, with vigor and health would walk around slowly with Marian who could not walk easily, taking in these expressions from the depot of suffering.

Circling Around: Fourth Story

When Bernie was recovering from his stroke, he felt an incredible softening in his heart. He said there was no room anymore for any hatred, for any pockets of resentment. The stroke was like a furnace that burnt away distrust. He saw that one of the functions of this retreat is to bring people from many diverse cultures together so that we could let go of our distrust, even our dislike and open our hearts to all. The burning away of negative karma is what Bernie experienced in his healing. No room for anymore for negativity!

He realized that he was having the same experience that Marian had had. For Bernie, coming to this retreat was completing that circle. Here was Bernie, in a wheel chair, occasionally taking a few steps with or without a cane, weakened physically yet so gentle, warm, radiant and kind. Just like Marian! I had the joy of sharing a Feldenkrais session with Bernie. The softness of his neck and the receptivity of his body moved me deeply.

So many impressions live on in me:

- The horror of Auschwitz is endless and therefore beginning-less.
- Forgiveness and understanding cannot come lightly but require going through the cauldron. Screaming might be the right response to all of this. No shame. No superficial spiritual principles of "love all" or "God's will" or "its all part of the plan". NO.

Still, can we ask, without self-judgement:

- Who do I close my heart to?
- Who is cast out?
- Who and what in myself is not forgiven?
- Can we die with a clear heart?

Both Marian and Bernie are inspirations for my path. I hope that I do not need a stroke or its equivalent to live further into sharing my gifts with the world. Let's be careful here, Oneness is not enough unless it includes two-ness. When we have realizations of our Oneness with all of Life, something deeply rests, our sense of connectedness is profound. We need this big AHHH, this harmony with Life. I have seen that this realization can also lead to a kind of subtle passivity in which we are so open to "what is" and to the big "YES" that we lose our life-giving, life-sustaining "NO".

In the Jewish mystical traditions, there is an invitation to argue with G-d. In my opinion, something like this is important. On the one hand, it is important that we deeply embrace Life or G-d or reality "as-it-is", it is our job to embrace IT in all forms. This includes the end of relationships, the death of loved one's and the harrowing diagnosis. AND there is as much room as needed to scream into the dark sky! To wrestle with G-d or fight with "what is". Then from our basic opening to "all that is", we do our best to ease suffering for all.

Finally, I am working with the question of VOW. In Zen, vow means, what is the center of your life, what are you truly devoted to? In the presence of Marian's mission to bring his experience to the world and in gratitude to Bernie's dedication to "saving all beings", I ponder my right actions, my vows, my next steps. How can I help the light that is in and around all of us to be felt, seen and known?

From Rilke-

"I am circling around God,
around the ancient tower,
and I have been circling for a thousand years,
and I still don't know
if I am a falcon,
or a storm,
or a great song."

