



The World Community for Christian Meditation

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A Meditator's Essay on Victimhood, Guilt, and Love as Rescue

I read Father Laurence's March 2012 essay in *The Tablet* (<http://www.wccm.org/content/tablet-march-2012>) about the Polish Catholic man (Bogdan Blalek) who was instrumental in (and deeply moved by) the construction of the Kielce Menorah in Poland, a Holocaust memorial, and I emailed Father Laurence to share my thoughts. In consideration of Father Laurence's suggestion that my perspective may be helpful for this community, I would like to share my thoughts on victimhood, guilt, and love as a form of rescue.

I fully concur that the remembering must be purposeful not nostalgic, and that many hearts have been unforgettably touched by the holocaust, in the right way. However, I regret that not enough have been...and I'm referring, in this case, to Jewish hearts: My father was a holocaust survivor from Romania, my brother now a right-wing Orthodox "Baal Teshuvah" as they say in Israel, living in a new 'anglo' development not far from Jerusalem. As for me, I'm married to an Irish Catholic (a heathen/pariah from the perspective of my own family and culture, but I have found a home, and a family, with my husband's family and also within the Christian meditation community).

The hardest thing is to rebound when one's heart has been scorched unforgettably, but the torch in the Olympics of Suffering lights the way for no one. The only torch that matters is the light of the spirit within each of our hearts, and that light is equally luminescent within everyone, Jew and Christian, survivor or not. But suffering is meaningless unless we ALL learn to love better from it, and the responsibility to clean the glass on our internal light isn't exclusively the burden of the 'majority'; victimhood doesn't ascribe any unique rights to rest on laurels of presumed luminescence.

This essay isn't meant to deny or mock the reality of victimhood, to deny the need to 'feel' in order to 'heal', or to deny the importance of justice either. Primarily, it is to say that it can be a fine and treacherous line between honouring our trials and clinging to past experiences of victimhood. When the idea of victimhood (or survivor-hood) overshadows our entire identity, and leads us to impose our needs on everyone around us, it doesn't honour our soul; it gradually destroys it, trapping it in the past. It blocks us from experiencing greater love in the present moment and from generating greater love in the world. In my experience, I have

found this to be true of survival from any trauma in life, but, also, sadly, to be very true of Jewish culture today.

With respect to well-intentioned guilt over one's ancestors' inaction during the holocaust, I would like to suggest that we hold onto guilt because it gives us the illusion that we are engaged in constructive action, but that, in truth, guilt is mostly unconstructive, self-directed violence. It is neither sustainable nor the most constructive way to either inner or world peace. Love and peace toward all (including ourselves) has to be the way toward peace; we have to practice expanding our hearts in the present, to achieve the end goal.

So, for those with a heartfelt, honourable desire to free Holocaust survivors of their pain, the second key objective of this essay is to express a sincere wish: That you will come to recognize that the healthiest, most constructive way to honour the living survivors today is to do more than express the vague hope that the world doesn't repeat the same tragedy. We must ensure that every act of commemoration recognizes, with firm kindness not condescension, the need to apply the slogan "Never Again" to the persecution of people that is occurring now, in our time. There's a very moving and wise scene in the first film of the Lord of the Rings trilogy that comes to mind; it's where the deity-like character Gandalf says to the hobbit Bilbo: "I have not come to rob you of your "precious". I've come to help you. Trust me as you once did. Let it go". Victimhood can be a "precious" possession, but it needs to be let go, or it will just permit the cycle of violence to be perpetuated.

The hardship that Israel has imposed on the entire people of Gaza does not reflect the study of the Torah message of "Love thy neighbour as thyself". What it does reflect is a cold study of the Holocaust, and, more specifically, of how to achieve the systematic dehumanization of a people. Unfortunately, when outsiders criticize Israel's actions, they are quickly labelled anti-Semites, and when Jewish people do so we are labelled as a "self-hating Jew" (or, when the speaker's feeling generous: "naive?"). When I married outside the faith, my brother told me that I was finishing off what Hitler failed to do. But please note: My brother, and his entire "anglo immigrant" community (near Jerusalem) did not need to move to Israel to escape discrimination. And would Israeli sentries really need to guard Israeli children playing on the green rooftop playgrounds of Arab buildings in East Jerusalem if the Palestinian children weren't living in squalor below (something which my husband and I observed firsthand on our honeymoon there in the late '90's) ?

In our chaotic childhood, my brother was my closest ally, my best friend, but dogmatism is a comfort blanket to insecurity. Over time, I've come to accept that trying to "blame and shame" him (or others like him) out of dogmatic, exclusionary views is neither emotionally sustainable for me, nor an effective means of regaining the brother I once had. I've always financially supported nonprofits that work to expand love and peace in the region (e.g., B'Tselem, Peace Now), but have recently shifted entirely to that more emotionally sustainable strategy. These organizations are far better equipped than I to deal directly, rationally, and effectively with the issues. I have come to accept that this approach to taking care of myself, and the Jewish people, is the most effective thing I can do to respect the maxim of "Never Again". The only reason I responded directly to the story of the Polish fellow now is that I saw him suffering in a way that seemed familiar, but also deeply unhealthy, both for him and for the Jewish people. Unfortunately, it is my impression that he is not the only who is preoccupied in this way.

With all this in mind, I would like to share a poem that I wrote for my brother (who now goes by his Hebrew name, "Eliyahu", since he became Orthodox). This poem was inspired by one

individual, and by one event, and arose in the context of one faith, but, like all poems, it is meant to speak to a greater truth: And in this case, that is that one can never ?free? another from a sense of victimhood. The only true escape from victimhood is the practice of love both to ourselves AND beyond ourselves, and the only true means of rescuing those with a sense of victimhood is by gently, lovingly, non-condescendingly, and repeatedly modelling this to them. A tall order, I realize, but I really believe that this is the direction in which our emotional energies need to go.

The words ?sheltered heads? and ?rainhat? in the poem refer to the black hats of my brother and his community. The reference to ?ancient tunes? refers to Hebrew songs written in the pre-Israel days, which I was taught at Jewish school. They had a bittersweet advent-like air about them, and spoke of the hope to return to the Holy Land in a time of exile. The bit about ?faces that you won?t see? refers to the Orthodox prohibition against replicating human images (viewed as idolatrous), but, because this poem was written the year that I was married (albeit tweaked endlessly since), it also refers to my husband.

I have found equanimity in the knowledge that other meditators sail alongside me in the storm and confusion of life, echoing the mantra from their hearts, like a foghorn bellowing out in the darkness. This continues to help me to find my way closer to home, to the Light within my heart, in the midst of the waves. Peace be with you all.

With much gratitude for your community,

SOS (Name withheld upon request)

For Eli (Making it Home in Shades of Grey)

Sheltered heads stood before you,
Restless leaves danced at your feet,
whispering words, from a faraway land:
?Beaten man, come hear our beat?

Now you?re inside a lighthouse, where it?s warm and dry
(though you?ve turned off all the lights).

Would a tighter grip onto that rainhat
keep the rolling fog at bay tonight?

When does vision help to see, and belonging fail to charm?

How does it help to feel that you own the healing words tied to your arms?

And you've drawn the bridge that I crossed

And you've a drawn look in your eyes

And I'm sorry that your warmth leaves love out in the cold

Are you sorry I haven't capsized?

Your ancient tunes ring out over the sea

They catch but then ache my heart

And I'm struck by a wave of sickening motion

Glancing back at your lighthouse in dark

Salt in my eyes, salt in my ears, still is the light that gets me out of here;

It's not my father's house, but it's taking me home.

How can any heart be profane, if every breath's made divine?

Why would you turn love into a race, if it needn't have a finish line?

You say a welcome mat sits outside your door, but it hangs on that unbroken thread.

There is solace in faces that you won't see, no solace where the blind are led.

May the cracks in your windows let in the breeze

A house that's full of itself is always empty

Wrap the blanket of grey mist around you gently

Make it home, find a way out to see

Away (from my father's house)... Away (from my brother's house)...

Away (to a house with no walls)... That's where I'll make it home.

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