

I AM THE STRANGER

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Readings

Little Gidding, the Fourth Quartet by T.S. Eliot

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;

At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half heard, in the stillness
Between the two waves of the sea.

Quick now, here, now, always--
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of things shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

The Epistle to the Galatians 3:28

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov
All the world is just a narrow bridge,
just a narrow bridge, just a narrow bridge.
And above all, and above all
is not to fear, not to fear at all.

Sermon

When I was 14, my mother and I went to the '72 Olympics in Munich. We were there to see the gymnastics. Some of you may remember Olga Korbut who made her splash that year. I'll be curious if anyone else here knows who won the women's all around gold medal. It wasn't Olga. It was a complicated trip on many levels. Just my mother and me, traveling so differently than our family usually did. We stayed with a German family, negotiated public transportation, dealt with serious flight complications. We managed to fit in two sightseeing trips outside the Olympic complex – to one of mad King Ludwig's gold-drenched castles. And to Dachau.

Identity and connection are such intense issues in adolescence, and this trip at this time offered significant experiences of both. As a sheltered girl from suburban Detroit, my encounters of identity and connection revolved more around others who loved the same TV show as I did – yes, I am a Trekkie from way back. Yet I truly was on the cusp of so much more, and my heart was ready to receive it.

Dachau was outside the realm of anything familiar. I knew little about the Holocaust, and I don't remember my mother preparing me. She did tell me that we should talk very quietly when we were there – and that we shouldn't mention our trip to our German hosts. Yet as we walked about the grounds at the concentration camp, I didn't fully understand why. Terrible things had happened here, I knew that much, but I saw little direct evidence of them. Concrete slabs were laid out where the barracks had been. I suppose I was too young to understand the significance of the barbed wire and the guard towers. I don't remember seeing the wrought iron gate with its ominous sign. *Arbeit macht frei*. Work makes us free. Walking around the grounds I was almost bored, certainly disappointed.

Then we wandered into an enclosure off to one side with quaint brick buildings shaded by trees. Something inviting at last, I thought, and I stepped up through a doorway with some anticipation. Inside I faced a wall of ovens, each just wide and just deep enough to hold a single human body. Before each open door to each oven lay a single fresh red rose. I felt as if I had been slapped across the face. I could almost hear the echo of that slap reverberating through the deathly silent room.

Suddenly everything changed. The outward silence fell deep inside me in wordless horror. Before me stood evidence of the human capacity for evil. The world I knew was torn open. It now must be a place where people were capable of such despicable acts. No serpent had offered me a bite from an apple, though the place had been enticing enough. The knowledge of good and evil hit me like a physical blow.

Later that night my mother and I wrote postcards home. Mom wrote of King Ludwig's castle which had been so covered in gold leaf that it made me nauseous. I wrote everyone about Dachau. One of those postcards still haunts me.

Earlier that summer I had been to camp and had become close friends with a Jewish girl. We found that instant intimacy that being together 24-hours a day at camp can engender. My sheltered upbringing had included no Jews. Indeed Rachel was probably the first person I had met with a discernible difference from me. It was thrilling to discover this combination of connection and difference in a friend. She was at the top of my postcard list.

I wrote her about Dachau, still not fully conscious of her own relationship to the holocaust. I sensed something awkward in this, but my feelings were powerful if still unformed. I needed to attempt to put words to them. The final line of this not-fully-articulate expression of my horror was that seeing Dachau had made me wish I were Jewish.

When I've told this story before, some people have thought 14 is too young to take a child to a place like Dachau. Too young to expose one innocent and naïve to such inhumanity. I disagree. Indeed, I was keenly troubled by the experience, and I don't think my mother was aware of the possible consequences of that moment. Yet my heart was wide open and the horror entered me so viscerally that it changed me. My first reaction was a deep yearning for connection. As if somehow, I could heal the breach, the broken human covenant with my very body. That if only we could all reach across our differences, we could heal something profoundly damaged.

From that moment, everything in the camp became as if a part of me. The ghastly pictures and artifacts in the museum. The memorial sculpture in the courtyard. From a distance, it appeared to be an abstract of lines and angles in wrought iron. Coming closer I could see that it depicted rail-thin bodies reaching out at all angles in desperation and agony. Yet I sensed in it, too, a powerful yearning. Yearning for freedom, for human connection, for salvation.

That sculpture reflected my own terror and my own yearning.

I tried to put all this together in tiny printing on that postcard to my friend Rachel. When I finished writing, something still felt not-quite-right, but it also felt true, so I put the foreign stamp on it and put it in the mail.

I never heard from Rachel again. Camp intimacies often evaporate though we swear true friendship and undying loyalty. Perhaps she would never have written anyway. Yet I have always wondered what on earth she thought on receiving a passionate and inarticulate postcard from her Gentile friend about the Holocaust. In the years since, I have always feared that I offended her.

This loss of innocence and loss of friendship have stayed with me, a remembered shame. The Holocaust – and the new forms of genocide we have perpetrated in the decades since – still move me to tears of desperation and horror. I cry for the people, and I cry for a sincere 14-year-old, and I cry for us all.

I came away from Dachau yearning for deep connection in the face of human brokenness, human evil. I yearned for such connection so powerfully that I thought I might achieve it if I could somehow share the suffering of such atrocity.

For the past few weeks, our services have reflected upon the question Who is the Other? Who is the stranger? All the world's religions try to bridge human difference, difference that breeds divisiveness and hatred, hatred that can lead ultimately to human atrocity. Religions want us to see ourselves in the other, the other in ourselves so completely as to break down all distinctions. Hence the passage from Galatians. Religions seek to re-connect us each to the other. My reaction to Dachau was profoundly religious in this sense, although I didn't have that framework at the time. I just knew I needed to feel connected. In the face of something so awful, I needed a connection so strong it could overcome the pain.

For the truth is that we feel separate from one another. We are all the stranger. And we have a powerful need to have our identity – both individual and collective – to be seen and affirmed.

Often we go around thinking that each of us must be the only person on the planet with this particular pain, this particular neurosis, this particular worldview. We all feel strange in some way. There are times we all feel like a motherless child, and there can be a great pain and loneliness in it.

What a relief it can be to find that others share some part of our experience. Even in the face of the atrocities of which we are capable – indeed perhaps because of them – I can't tell you how wonderful it still is for me to find someone else who loves Star Trek as much as I do.

To be fully human is to live in the intersection of being separate individuals yet connected to each other and to a greater whole. Yet how we live at that intersection is critically important.

The narrow bridge between identity and connection is where we all live. We must walk that bridge with care, and yet without fear. For it is fear – fear of the other – that creates the danger.

Yet walking this narrow bridge is not the most wonderfully comfortable journey. It's hard to stay on the path. And so, more often we align ourselves with groups that also give us a sense of identity and distinction.

It's an attractive and dangerous place. For our identity feels fragile and vulnerable and we will defend it with whatever tool is available. Ironically, religion is also one of the most powerful tools for division. Identity in the collective is the most powerful. It's so easy to set ourselves up against someone who is other. When our identity is too caught up in a collective that is too narrowly defined, we are in great peril.

I think of the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda who killed each other over a non-existent racial distinction. A distinction that their colonizers created in order to exploit them all more effectively and efficiently.

I think of Shia and Sunni Muslims who share the fundamental tenets of Islam and whose differences are mostly political and yet are willing to kill one another because they pray differently.

I think of the Israelis and Palestinians. Ironically, my mother and I left Munich just as the Israeli athletes were being taken hostage, from the very airport where they would later be killed. We didn't yet know about it. It took me years to connect that event with my experience at Dachau, and my ignorance of that has haunted me since.

We are far from immune. We deplore the narrowness of fundamentalist Christianity and conservative politicians. Yet how often do we use such distinctions to feel superior and more righteous than those who disagree with us?

Rather we need to learn to stand at the intersection of identity and connection both consciously and fearlessly. Awareness and courage must be our tools. For without them we, too, fall prey to the dangers of narrowing our identity and our sense of connection.

We must acknowledge the great pain we feel at separation. We must seek not division but unity in our differences – for at the very least we share this sense of loneliness and separation. We must take time to know ourselves and know one another. We must stand fearlessly in the face of human culpability and capacity for evil. We must seek beauty and love in the ashes of the worst we are capable of.

T.S. Eliot wrote most of his great poem *The Four Quartets* during World War II, the bombing of London. Yet he could find hope in the midst of the bombs and the fires. He could imagine the fire and the rose being one. He could still echo Julian of Norwich with faith that all shall be well.

The most hopeful and tender image I carry with me from Dachau is the roses laid at the open door of each oven. A promise not to forget. A statement that love and beauty are still a possible response to cruelty. An acknowledgement of pain. A refusal to be conquered by it.

We need both the serpent's apple and the human-tended rose. We need to know the truth of differences and the damage they can cause. We need to know the truth of the greater love that binds us and heals us.

We must see the beauty in our differences. We must seek unity there. We must conquer fear. Fear of ourselves. Fear of one another.

The world is indeed a narrow bridge.
Fear not.

Blessed Be. Amen.