

The Freedom to Disobey

In 2003, on my first trip to Germany, I went to visit Dachau. Growing up in Israel in the 50s and 60s, the Holocaust was a formative story for all that we became, and I wanted to honor something I can't put into words through this symbolic gesture of visiting a concentration camp. More than that, there was something I was seeking to understand. Through Nonviolent Communication, I discovered the radical proposition that everything that humans do, including horrors, is, at bottom, an attempt to meet common human needs. Somehow I believed that visiting Dachau could help me understand what could possibly bring human beings to engage in the behaviors that the Nazis did. Nothing that I saw in Dachau helped me. The whole setup was oddly sanitized, empty of any emotional or moral content. The museum had plaques that simply listed the facts. Nothing gave me any sense of active reflection on the part of those who created the exhibits on why and how something like the Holocaust could have happened.

While taking this trip to Dachau, I was staying for a few days with a German woman, whom I will call Ulla, in her parents' second home near Munich. Over our first dinner, Ulla told me about having made the choice to move back in with her aging parents. She expressed her deep pleasure at finally being able to talk with them about everything, and how much that had transformed their relationships. At some point during the visit, the inevitable question that probably every Jew from Israel holds somewhere when interacting with a German came up: what did Ulla's parents do during the war? The resulting conversation was difficult and deeply intimate. The most astounding part for me was that she spoke about how they have barely ever talked about the war and the parents' choices at that time, and how much pain she's had as a result. This revelation was very moving for me, and stood in stark contrast to the description from the previous dinner of being able to talk about everything. Somehow, this topic was not part of everything. I often wonder and try to imagine what it is like to grow up knowing that your own parents or grandparents participated in some big or small way in one of humanity's darkest chapters.

As our time together was winding down, Ulla shared that our interactions were very meaningful and healing for her, and asked to maintain connection with me. Sadly, that didn't happen, despite the experience of flow and intimacy that we both acknowledged. She did, once, and after many months, respond to my emails saying that it was very difficult for her to continue to think about this, and that she would respond more fully at a later time. I never heard from her again. I imagine this was just too painful for her, even if significant and healing. She holds a clue to why I continue to feel uncomfortable whenever I am in Germany. It's not because the Holocaust happened; it's because I don't get a sense that it's really been digested, integrated, mourned, and learned from. There's a distance I experience from it, either generational or moral. I long for engagement instead.

More recently, a young German woman, Anna Pfeifer, invited me to watch the movie *Hitler's Children* (Ze'evi, 2011). This movie was made by Israelis, and is a documentary about several people who are descendants of Hitler's closest circle, including Himmler, Goering, and a few others. Once again, even though I sensed that people spoke very openly and frankly, I didn't hear

from anyone a real engagement with the question that most haunts me: what made it possible for so many people to participate in this system? The people who spoke address almost exclusively the individual dimension: Who was that person that was their ancestor? What was the personal pathology that he had? What can the descendant do to heal and transform, or distance and denounce, the legacy they have been handed? It was the individuals that were the problem. I didn't hear anyone discuss in any meaningful way anything about the social and systemic conditions that facilitated their ancestors' actions alongside such large scale acquiescence in the population at large that supported those actions.¹

These are not idle intellectual questions for me. Knowing the answers, or at least gaining some insight towards them, is for me key to whether we can ever truly expect to create a different way of living, or whether we are doomed to continue on the path of destruction we've been on. It is, in large part, for this reason that I have been reading, thinking, and writing about human nature for so many years.

What finally pushed these questions from an ongoing yet background quest to a more focused intention was a configuration of multiple events that took place within a week, a little over two years ago. These included the movie about Hannah Arendt (von Trotta, 2012), the woman who coined the term "the banality of evil" regarding Eichmann's role in the mass killings of Jews under Hitler; reading excerpts from Carne Ross's book *Leaderless Revolution* (Ross, 2011) about his participation in enforcing sanctions on Iraq; a personal mini-crisis that catapulted me into a deeper capacity to understand my calling and role in life; and more. It took all this time for the article to complete itself. My explorations start, as often, in childhood.

Before and after writing this article I've had several discussions with Anna, including extensive comments on this article. I was profoundly moved by her courage in looking at the questions I raise here in relation to her own life. I got the very engagement with her that I didn't get with Ulla. Anna's experience confirms my sense of an absence of a certain emotional engagement. As she said: "I grew up believing that it was some other people but not *my* people/*my* family who participated in this system. My family/people was/were different and *obviously* did not actively participate in it. The responsibility was always diverted to few people who were characterized as evil. I heard my parents say at various times it was only a few horrible people who were responsible and the others were not able to do otherwise." Her personal experience is far from unique. Anna cited research, which is not available in English, by sociologist Harald Welzer (Welzer, 2002). His large-scale survey on this topic found that 49% of Germans believe that their parents or grandparents had a negative attitude towards the Nazis and 26% believe that their family was actively resisting the Nazi regime or were helping victims. Only 1% stated that their parents or grandparents had a positive attitude towards the Nazis. Only 3% believe that their ancestors were anti-Semitic and only 1% believe that their ancestors were directly involved in the atrocities. Anna said, simply: "In my 25 years of living in Germany I have never met a single person

¹ I am not in any way suggesting that there haven't been discussions about these questions. Indeed, books like *Hitler's Willing Executioners* by Daniel Goldhagen, have stimulated intensive debates and scholarship on the topic of the social origins of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. My point is that in my experience this hasn't filtered down to Germans I have met. I have been told by many that during their school years there was far too much emphasis on guilt and far too little on an honest examination of what happened and what to do to reduce its likelihood in the future.

(!) who spoke about the involvement of their family during the Holocaust.” Anna’s experience conforms to Welzer’s conclusion that the official version of attending to the Holocaust, and the private memories that people have are very different.

When Anna first discovered the historical facts, she was deeply shaken. Nonetheless, like so many other Germans, she, too, let go of the exploration, finding it too overwhelming. She accepted the assertion by her parents that her grandparents didn’t participate. And yet, somehow, she noticed an air of pride when she was told that her grandmother worked in a hotel where one night Hitler had dinner. The entire discussion was always, as she said, “a ‘factual’ engagement with the Holocaust (in different subjects in school, in documentaries or magazine articles, books) but no intrapersonal or interpersonal engagement at all!” In wondering about why that is, she traces it, like me, to feelings of shame. So much so, that even after living in the US for three years, encountering the realities of racial privilege here, and determining to investigate the past, she went back home and stopped short of actually doing the research after telling her parents about her intention to file the research request and then hearing from them that they did not want to know. She still, in fact, doesn’t know if her grandparents were or were not members of the Nazi party. I treasure her willingness to speak with me about this, and to choose to reveal her name when this article is made public.

Obedience and Rationality

For many parents and teachers, the highest good in terms of children’s behavior is obedience. As Alice Miller documented in *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (Miller, 1983), this was particularly evident in the German-speaking parts of Europe. She quotes pages and pages from child-rearing manuals that were popular at the turn of the 20th century, passages that I could barely read. Still less could I truly imagine the suffering of the little children that had to endure those practices on a routine basis.

Obedience is nothing other than going along with someone else’s wishes or orders at a time when, if left to our own devices, we would do something else. It is an act of submission to another’s will, of giving up our own feelings, needs, intuition, moral judgment, and anything else that would constitute our own choice, so as to follow something external and often dissonant. Whether we obey based on fear, calculation of risks, or loyalty and respect, this act of disengaging from our own inclination in order to follow another’s is foundational to what it means to obey, since there is no need to *obey* if we already agree with what is being expected of us – by law or by command or parent, teacher, commander, police officer or other authority figure. It is only when we disagree that obedience is necessary.²

As I see it, being raised to obey cannot but result in a reduced capacity to think for ourselves, to access our intuition and empathy, and to make tough choices that risk disapproval. I carry with me, with some tenderness and horror, the story of a man, a personal acquaintance of mine, who,

² The intention to break a child’s will continues to be promoted in childrearing books. In 1994, a child-rearing manual – *To train up a Child* by Michael and Debi Pearl – that has sold hundreds of thousands of copies, says: “Training is the conditioning of the child’s mind before the crisis arises; it is preparation for future, instant, unquestioning obedience,” say the authors.

at age seven, found a special insect, captured it, and delightedly told his science teacher about it. His teacher gave him alcohol to drown the insect in, and asked that he bring it to the school science laboratory. The child proceeded to do this with great enthusiasm, thinking of this as his contribution to science. The insect, meanwhile, had other designs. Struggling for its life, it repeatedly attempted to climb out of the alcohol, and succeeded in doing so several times before it was finally drowned. All this time the child was shaking, and used tremendous will power to overcome his aversion to inflicting further damage on the insect. In the name of science, he set his feelings aside. As he later said: "I never questioned my actions, only my feelings."

Nothing I can think of demonstrates this tendency to suppress our feelings and obey more painfully than the infamous Milgram experiments in the early 1960s, in which the overwhelming majority of participants willingly subjected others to electric shocks which, though in reality imaginary, appeared to them to inflict severe pain on the victims. The participants nonetheless continued to administer the shocks.³

I had the good fortune of actually watching Milgram's film *Obedience* (Milgram, 1962), an experience which completely changed my perspective and understanding of what is significant about those experiments. What I found most striking was the degree of personal anguish so many of the participants experienced as they were administering the electric shocks, clearly indicating that their basic reaction was one of aversion to harming another.⁴ While people can be brought to ignore, override, suppress, or numb out their natural empathic responses, Milgram's experiments show the enormous cost to human beings of overcoming natural empathy. It's obedience or fear, not lack of care, that allows these acts. Even SS officers were crying while killing Jews in the earlier years of World War II.⁵

If the highest good of a child's behavior is obedience, the equivalent for adults is rationality. Rationality in the moral sphere is seen as the capacity to use reason as a way to transcend the narrow confines of self-interest. Perhaps because of the fundamental distaste for emotions and the mistrust of human nature,⁶ Western moral philosophers have tended to view reason as the only human quality that could form the basis of such a transcendence of self. They have tended to view morality as grounded in a moral principle that conforms to reason – be it duty or virtue – rather than in human relationships. This essentially means following a moral code, or a set of abstract rules that apply to everyone. Acting morally means acting out of duty, not based on

³ Although these experiments were criticized in a variety of ways, subsequent attempts to replicate the experiments had similar results. See also "Conscience and Authority", (Andre & Velasquez, 1988), where the authors state that "most people will obey external authority over the dictates of conscience."

⁴ This suffering was so intense that one of the consequences of these experiments was the establishment of "Human Subject Review Boards" which look at every research proposal that involves human participants. Before approving them, they consider whether there would be suffering involved for the participants.

⁵ This was one of the reasons for the shift in strategy from mass shootings to gas chambers, which were more removed, allowing the executioners to bear the action more easily.

⁶ Emotions are also often associated with women, another factor in the general distaste for them. Jean Shinoda Bolen, in an LA public reading of her book *Urgent Message From Mother: Gather the Women, Save the World*, San Francisco, Conari (2005), described a situation where two warring parties in Sierra Leone were asked by the UN to have 50% women participate in the negotiations of a treaty. The response was: "We don't want women here, they're just going to compromise." (Note: I do not advocate for compromise, since that is a lose-lose proposition. I believe that what the response points to is the fear that women will have more willingness to negotiate, hear each other, open their hearts, and shift perspective as a result.)

emotions. Emmanuel Kant, the grandfather of modern moral theory, went as far as to say that if there is emotion involved and not *pure* duty, then whatever action we take cannot be deemed moral. Once again, just in the same way as obedience, moral rationality demands of us to set aside our own inner guidance – be it empathy, care, intuition, our critical thinking, or our own moral sensibilities – and act in line with rules and norms external to our own choosing.⁷

Oddly enough, rationality in the economic sphere has come to mean brutal self-interest, maximizing benefit to self without concern for others, relying on the “invisible hand” to sort it out for everyone’s benefit. How it is that the same faculty that is supposed to be linked to self-interest can be the faculty we rely on for moral action that transcends self-interest is beyond my own capacity to grasp.

Morality and Empathy

Hannah Arendt, in characterizing Eichmann, attributed to him an incapacity to think, still echoing the emphasis on rationality. One of the handful of survivors from the infamous S-21 prison of the Khmer Rouge (out of close to 20,000 who had been imprisoned there during Pol Pot’s regime), made a similar comment when facing one of the guards in a dramatic encounter orchestrated for the film *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (Panh, 2002). As the guard answered his pointed questions, the survivor commented that the guard clearly was not able to think for himself.

I, on the other hand, in both instances, was struck by the absolute lack of any emotional expression. The movie about Hannah Arendt contains significant portions of footage from the actual trial. It was my first time seeing this footage, and I wanted to watch it for hours on end, just to be able to see more and more of Eichmann himself. If I hadn’t known, I would have never guessed that he was single-handedly responsible for so much of what happened to my people in the Holocaust. He looked strikingly ordinary, rather slight in features, and anxious in his movements, with an ongoing twitch in his mouth and absolutely no emotional expression. When he said that he didn’t have anything personal against the Jews, I believed him. His was a decidedly different mode of being than that of Hitler. As far as I can tell from footage I have seen over the years, Hitler was consumed with a passionate fire and with virulent hatred. Not Eichmann. At one point in the proceedings he even accepted the version offered by one of the lawyers, that there was a split in him, where his moral conscience was simply not involved, separated. That split is, for me, one of the key paths that allow people to do immensely horrific actions: disengaging from their own human fellow-feeling in the name of obedience, or some other value, or a rational argument. He did what he did because of obedience, which, in his case, I believe was mostly about his allegiance to Hitler rather than because of fear, though I have no way of knowing. He would have killed his own family, he concurred, had those been the orders given to him. What is most stunning for me is the sense I get that Eichmann was not an exceptional individual; that the main culprit was the extreme reliance on obedience to a man blinded by his own hatred to the point of embarking on a genocide; and that, therefore, people with certain experiences and upbringing would naturally rise to the top of the social order in such a system.

⁷ Although this is not the only strand within Western moral theory, it continues to be dominant both to moral theory (e.g. Rawls) and to theories of moral development (e.g. Kohlberg).

For Carne Ross, a former high-ranking British diplomat who was in charge of enforcing the sanctions against Iraq, it was the rational argument and cultural norms that he alludes to in his remarkable personal statement about his role in enforcing sanctions on Iraq. Here is what he had to say about it. I quote at length because I found his description so transparent and clear that I believe it sheds light on the phenomenon of overriding our sensibilities in an unusually unsparing and yet tender way:

“I have no way to assuage the shame I feel when I contemplate this episode. I was aware of the reports of humanitarian suffering, but I did little about them. In discussion within my ministry, I may have occasionally argued for easing the effects of comprehensive sanctions. But if I did, I suspect that I argued the political grounds for such a shift – the loss of support for our policies – rather than the urgent moral and humanitarian argument. In our ministry’s culture, it was often ‘emotional’ or ‘immature’ to *burden arguments with moral sentiment*. Real diplomats were cold-eyed and hardheaded, immune to the arguments of liberal protesters, journalists and other softheads who did not understand how the ‘real world’ worked.

“For years afterward, I wondered how this might have happened. Why did we permit this? Or rather, the actual, direct but more uncomfortable question: Why did I do this? My colleagues and I were decent people, or so I preferred to think. Likewise, my ministers and officials who endorsed the policy and defended it in Parliament and before an increasingly critical press. It was this very decency that helped still my doubts, that persuaded me that we could not have been doing wrong. Later, in recounting this story, one of my former colleagues or friends would say, ‘*You were doing what you were told,*’ implying thereby that I bore no guilt and, needless to say, that they bore none either.” (Ross, 2011, pp. 126-7, emphases added.)

The guards in S-21 had remarkably similar statements to make. In the movie, as the parents of one former guard urge their son to tell the truth about his killings, so he could ask the dead to remove the bad karma, he is slow to respond. First he says that thinking about this gives him a headache, and then he says: “If we killed people, and I personally killed people, and of our own free will, then that’s evil. But I was given orders. They terrorized me with their guns and their power. That’s not evil. *The evil is the leaders who gave the orders*. Deep down I was afraid of evil” (emphasis added). Later in the movie, another guard, after reviewing the documentation of all that he had done to torture, harass, maim, and kill hundreds of prisoners, said this: “I didn’t think. I was arrogant, I had power over the enemy. I never thought of his life. I saw him as an animal.”⁸ Throughout the entire movie not once did any of them show any signs of disentangling themselves from those times.⁹ They were still referring to the former prisoners as “enemy” and many of them sounded like they were still justifying, even glorifying, the actions of the Party. It seems that it’s harder to acknowledge our own cruelty than to acknowledge another person’s pain – especially when we are the cause of that other person’s pain.

⁸ Engaging critically with the idea, implicit in this quote, that mistreating animals is an acceptable practice is quite beyond the scope of this article to address.

⁹ Part of the intense complexity of this particular example is that the particular strategy that the Khmer Rouge used was to have really young people as guards, sometimes as young as twelve years old. The guards’ training itself was using scare tactics, shaming, and forcing them to torture and kill animals, clearly in an effort to get them inured to others’ suffering.

Divergent in their scale, circumstances, and a host of other factors, all three accounts share, along with the Milgram experiments, the common factor of the remarkable willingness of many to follow orders that they knew would cause immense suffering to others. Rather than seeing these as reflecting an incapacity to *think* I see them as the result of a failure in *empathy*. It is empathy, not reason, that I see as the built-in mechanism that protects us from harming others.¹⁰ It is fear that interferes with empathy, because under conditions of extreme fear everything becomes secondary to the task of doing whatever it takes to preserve our own life. I was not surprised to learn that during the Chinese famine only rare individuals amongst local Party officials stood up to the central regime's orders to take grains away from those who grew them knowing there was nothing left for them to eat, so it could be made available for export to other countries. Those who stood up risked everything for their conscience, and often paid dearly, including by being executed. Most of the others succumbed to their own fear of what would happen to them. Collectively, they willingly sacrificed millions of people only so that they could pass the grains on to the central party and be rewarded rather than punished.

I watched, several times, a gripping documentary done in 1993 called *Testimonies* (Sela, 1993). (A short version of this movie is available on YouTube.) Director Ido Sela interviewed Israeli soldiers who beat up, shot, and killed Palestinians in the course of the first Intifada, in some cases subjecting them to prolonged physical torture. Their stories illustrate the same dynamic. Many of them felt a sense of trauma from having inflicted harm on others, and yet continued to do it – for fear of consequences to themselves if they didn't; because they were told it was the right thing, or for many other reasons that allowed them to ignore, override, or numb out their empathic responses to the people they harmed. In only one case did someone refrain from taking action, and that was when he got more deeply into an empathic stance by remembering his own daughter and likening her to the children he was facing.¹¹

A friend of mine had a series of remarkable conversations with a man who participated in the design of both the hydrogen bomb and Agent Orange. During one such conversation he said to her something along the lines of: "I cannot look at what you say, because then I would have to believe that I am personally responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, and I can't do that." This is, once again, testament to the emotional split that must occur in order for such actions to take place.

While the training in obedience goes back several thousand years, it is modern rationality that has accelerated the possibilities of harm. For his contribution to this understanding, I salute Zygmunt Bauman and his book *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Bauman 1989). As he says: "the civilizing process has ... made possible a scale of inhumanity and destruction which had remained inconceivable as long as natural dispositions guided human action." Modern rationality, with its efficiency and impersonal modes, has created conditions that make it more possible for people to override empathy. Although clearly humans have been capable of severe cruelty, what modern

¹⁰ At the same time, I see added layers of rich complexity here, since how we apply our thinking may enhance or deter empathy. This is, in part, why I advocate for integration of reason and emotion, not the "overthrow" of reason.

¹¹ This is an example of where a cognitive process – the act of remembering and reflecting – enhanced his access to empathy.

rationality has done is make such cruelty possible on larger scales, and more effectively. In part, this is because with modern rationality also comes technological innovation that makes mass killings both more technically plausible and more distant emotionally by mechanizing them. Still, Bauman focuses on the social more than the technical dimension. He singles out as causes of the new possibilities “those social mechanisms, also set in motion under contemporary conditions, that silence or neutralize moral inhibitions and, more generally, make people refrain from resistance against evil.” He equates such mechanisms in particular with the shift from moral to technical responsibility, which divorces means from ends and contributes to the disempowering of empathy as a moral force of resistance. When people focus more on doing a good job and following orders than on the impact of their actions, their innate capacity for empathy ceases to function as a guide to moral action. “Mass destruction,” says Bauman, “was accompanied not by the uproar of emotions, but the dead silence of unconcern.” The means/ends conundrum also shows up in the form of the all too common willingness to justify harmful means for a valued end: ending World War II, for example, justified dropping the atomic bomb; achieving communism justified killing off swathes of the population. The examples are too numerous and ubiquitous to catalog.

This is the internal contradiction of rationality I alluded to earlier: some of the conditions which enable people to engage in mass killings are the very criteria of morality favored by many moral theorists. Both are characterized by impersonality, objectivity, and the impartial application of rules to the exclusion of empathy for the people involved. This link gives frightening credence to Bauman's insistence that the “Holocaust did not just, mysteriously, avoid clash with the social norms and institutions of modernity. It was these norms and institutions that made the Holocaust feasible.”

The gift of empathy is that it integrates mind and heart in the very same act as it brings together self and other. When we ignore empathy, we pay an enormous price in the form of depression, apathy, victimization, and anger on an individual level, and crime, neglect, alienation, bullying, even war, on a societal level. When we cultivate empathy, our emotional health improves, and in addition also our sense of hope, and our capacity, both individually and collectively, to act as moral agents in responding to challenges. Considering the ongoing moral dilemmas each of us faces on a daily basis, as well as the enormous collective challenges facing us today, this is no small task.

Given the fragility of empathy in relation to fear, if we are to cultivate empathy, and with it the capacity to take courageous moral action, we need to change our relationship to fear as well as overcome the habit of following orders, with or without fear. We may be called upon to risk loss on many fronts, one of the core prerequisites for embracing nonviolence as a personal, moral, spiritual, or political path.

Morality and Power

Although morality is often constructed as rules and norms that apply to all, my observations of history as well as contemporary events lead me to believe otherwise. Within the context of social

institutions, I have come to see morality itself as an instrument of preserving power in the hands of those that have it: all of us are trained, through obedience and later the invocation of rationality, to follow certain norms, while those in positions of power often don't. Given that I've talked a lot about killings in this article, I will use killing as an example to illustrate this point. The injunction not to kill is probably the most universal in all moral codes. Yet, when instituted into law, it doesn't apply across the board. I am not talking about the complexities of what counts as self-defense. Rather, I am talking about the fact that individuals are tried for killing while heads of states are hailed for war victories in which they have issued orders that often result in killing large numbers of people – both of their own armies as well as of the other party to the war.

It's not that I am advocating abandoning moral considerations because they are mired in power. Rather, I don't see any way around discerning, again and again and freshly each time, what is the moral course of action for each of us in each moment, and then choosing it. I am arguing that following the given code of "rational" morality and society's norms tends to preserve the existing social order, especially in times of moral disintegration – be it Nazi Germany, totalitarian regimes anywhere, or corporate irresponsibility. Morality and social norms are not neutral; if applied without intense personal engagement they will tend to favor groups and individuals in power.¹² This understanding was a source of enormous personal liberation twenty-six years ago when I first caught a glimpse of it, and it is still reverberating in me to this day.

Disrupting Business as Usual

"You could have been my intellectual heir, but you don't have values." These were words that my father said to me when I was about twenty-two, not long before he was diagnosed with cancer and died. I was old enough to find his words humorous rather than painful, and, still, they shocked me. Anyone who knows me to any degree knows that I am deeply driven by my values, and this has been true as far back as I can remember and beyond, even as a small child. How could he have said this to me? It took me some time to understand this paradox. Simply put: I have *my own* values, and my father was condemning me for not following *conventional* values. As soon as I grasped this, I reframed his statement to be a badge of honor: I was able, even at that early age, to live life from within. Despite his ongoing efforts, my father never succeeded in frightening me enough to get me to obey him or any other authority. To this day, the only thing I come close to "obeying" is my own inner voice and intuition.

I have accepted the cost of living this way, with more and more grace over the years. Still, accepting it doesn't make it any less painful. It is only recently, through the experiences that led to writing this article, that I have come to see the connection between my way of living and my deep passion for contributing to a world that works for all. Starkly put: the perpetuation of a way of living that doesn't work for the vast majority of the world's population depends on all of us following the "business as usual" set of norms and rules that have been handed to us, recreated

¹² A striking example of this happens during mediation between individuals from different classes or racial groups. The norms of a mediation session tend to mimic the norms of white, middle class behavior: even keel expression, a certain rhythm of speech, and other subtle aspects of communication end up creating less space, less capacity to have voice, for those who are already powerless despite the genuine commitment to care for both parties and make room for everyone that is foundational to mediation.

and adapted mostly to support the dominance of those in power. Knowing this, part of what I have always done to counter this trend was to be a one-person act of inviting people to do something different. How I talk, what I talk about, what questions I ask, what answers I give, and how I have always related to authority have always been in an uneasy relationship with existing norms. I now have a context to make meaning of this pattern of being an agent of discomfort around me – something I call being a “conscious disruptor.” I can now embrace, with love for self and others, this role as an asset, as part of my work, rather than as a problem to be fixed.

What I mean by this being part of my work is not so much that my one-person act has any direct capacity to create change in the social order. I don't have any illusions about that. Rather, I see my way of being as serving two distinct functions. One is that it prepares me to have courage to face consequences in other, less privileged contexts. After all, what I suffer is *only* social repercussions. I have never risked losing a job, being incarcerated, or shot and killed. I have no way of knowing if I would have the inner strength to stand up to power to that degree. I can only hope so. I know that I was not surprised when I learned that a woman who took many risks in speaking up during a workshop I led in Germany some years back was descended from people who hid Jews during the Holocaust. As Samuel and Pearl Oliner document in what I consider a landmark study, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (Oliner, 1988), those who rescued tended to come from households where obedience and punishment were not stressed, and instead, they were raised to engage with values. The level of fear anyone had to overcome in order to rescue Jews was significant and I can't see how anyone could do it if they had been raised with fear as a primary mode of parenting.

The other function that I see my continuous disruption of business as usual serving is to be an invitation to others to join me. Granted, it's on a small scale, and still, on that scale I know I have inspired courage for many. Here's but one example. As part of the set of events that brought this article into being, I was coaching someone whose job is attending to matters of gender discrimination within her organization. I asked her – let's call her Angela – if she was getting support from her boss, and learned that while she was getting institutional support from her boss, she wasn't getting personal support to handle her own team and tasks. When I invited Angela to let her boss know that she wanted to do a stellar job, and for that she wanted support, she recoiled a little, telling me that she is reluctant because she is supposed to be able to do it on her own. That's when I reminded her that this norm is patriarchal. If Angela is to attend effectively to gender discrimination within her organization, there is no way around challenging the patriarchal norms that permeate the organization, a challenge that couldn't proceed without her doing it herself in all her relationships. Angela stopped short of actually doing this, though I know that she recognized the invitation and the challenge, and *wanted* to apply herself to it. That is one huge step towards transformation.

I hope so very much that this level of personal invitation is not all I do for social transformation, that I find ways to scale up, to make a dent in how structures function, to join forces with others who are choosing to look open-eyed at where we are in the world, so we can bring love,

empathy,¹³ and courage to work together for creating a different world. All of that is not within my capacity to choose, I can only hope for it. How I live, how I interact with others, is where I have the power to decide and act.

Empathy and Transformation

A common denominator to all the examples of horror I have alluded to throughout this article is the willingness to see someone else, or a group of people, as less than fully human, either in a certain moment of intensity or in general. Be it Jews, enemies of communism, Palestinians, infidels, peasants, or young black men – in order to justify violence or killing we humans tend to construct coherent stories about the person or population we are harming, making them out to be a danger that we are justified in attacking, torturing, or killing. This is the fundamental failure of empathy: the loss of the ability to see the possibility of multiple stories and to recognize that the other's way of being, their actions, culture, or anything else about them, make as much sense to them as ours do to us. Here, again, combining critical thinking with empathy provides a path towards more capacity to resist dehumanization.

I don't know any way around the logical conclusion from this realization that temporary or permanent dehumanizing of others is core and central to any act of violence.¹⁴ Carolina De Robertis, whose novel *Perla* engages with another horrifying chapter in human cruelty – the reign of the junta in Argentina responsible for many thousands of *desaparecidos*, said it in very simple terms in an interview she's given about her work (De Robertis, 2012). Her point of view, which I share, is that as a society, in order to move beyond violence, we are called to acknowledge the humanity of perpetrators of crimes against humanity no less than our own. Otherwise we ourselves participate in the dehumanizing of others, and the cycle continues.

One form of my own attempts to humanize the perpetrators is that I collect and remember stories about moments in which people otherwise seen as monsters acted in ways that I experience as completely human. One such story is about Stalin and the pianist Maria Yudina. After receiving a significant sum of money from Stalin for a recording she had made, Yudina sent him a letter in which she said: "I thank you, Joseph Vissarionovich, for your aid. I will pray for you day and night and ask the Lord to forgive your great sins before the people and the country. The Lord is merciful and He'll forgive you. I gave the money to the church that I attend." Instead of ordering her execution, Stalin set the letter aside without a word. The story has it that her recording was on the record player when he was found dead, suggesting that it was the last thing he listened to.¹⁵

Another story is a moment in the exchanges between Eugene De Kock and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela. De Kock was the mastermind of apartheid repression, the commanding officer of a

¹³ Empathy is essential because even when love and courage exist, as may have been the case for at least some of the Bolsheviks (love for the working class, that is), an absence of empathy can still result in a reign of terror.

¹⁴ As I noted before (footnote 9 above), this frame has behind it the subtle and background acceptance of violence towards other life forms that aren't human. As an astute friend noted, no forest has to be dehumanized *first* before being clear-cut. Exploring these aspects of differential reverence for life is something I hope to come back to in future writings.

¹⁵ The full story can be found here: <http://www.crossroadsculturalcenter.org/events/2011/9/17/maria-yudina-the-pianist-who-moved-stalin.html>. As amazing as this story is, it's not clear how far the details of it actually took place.

South African Police unit that kidnapped, tortured, and murdered hundreds of anti-apartheid activists from the 1980s to the early-90s.¹⁶ Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela is a former Truth and Reconciliation Committee member. She embarked on a series of interviews with De Kock who was by then imprisoned for his role in Apartheid, and wrote a book about these interviews and beyond, called *A Human Being Died that Night* (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2003). In one of their interviews, with great effort, De Kock asked her whether he had hurt anyone she knew. Gobodo-Madikizela documents with great depth the pain and despair in his eyes, the clarity she had about how broken he felt. Her description captured his humanity in a way I found deeply compelling, even moving. Indeed, she herself struggled with a complex experience of compassion for this man who committed unspeakable atrocities, yet chose to acknowledge it and to re-open his own heart. Perhaps we simply never fully give up.

Both of these stories and others, both real and fictional, leave me wistfully hopeful. They remind me of what I see as a mysterious drive for wholeness that pulls us to heal, to recover, to find ourselves and life again. They leave me ready and willing to excavate the ruins of a soul, to look for continuities with my own humanity, in the form of shared human needs that motivate all our actions.

In the movie *Playing for Time* (Mann, 1984), based on the true story of the women's orchestra in Auschwitz, the main character on whose diary the movie was based participates with her friends in many conversations where they dream about what they will do after the war. At one point, she says something like this: "It's easy for you, because you see them as monsters. I, on the other hand, see them as human, which makes it all the more difficult to understand."

I want to conclude with one last story and an image. Ilya Repin, a Russian painter (1844 - 1930) who is unfortunately little known in the West, painted a picture of Ivan the Terrible, the Russian Czar who killed his own son in 1581. In the rather gory painting¹⁷, Repin shows the father holding the body of his son, and captures with immense human sensitivity the feelings that Ivan the father must have had at the time: the horror of his loss, the helplessness, and the shock at himself for having taken this act that cannot be undone.

This is our task as I see it: To forego training our children to be obedient. To integrate reason with emotion through embracing empathy as the foundation of a critical approach to morality. To stand up to power with courage and love. And to insist on an uncompromising commitment to see and honor everyone's humanity, even, and especially, when we aim to stop them from acting violently towards others. It doesn't mean *always* going against rules and norms; it does mean having the inner freedom to *choose*.

¹⁶ See Wikipedia article about him.

¹⁷ A not-so-clear online version can be found at <http://www.wetcanvas.com/forums/showthread.php?t=486243>, where a detail image shows the faces and is clear. A better image can be found at <http://reddomino.typepad.com/a/6a00d8341ccb7e53ef01156f9bdd89970c-pi> without the detail.

References

- Andre, Claire & Velasquez, Manuel. (1988). Conscience and Authority. *Issues in Ethics*, 1 (2).
- Bauman, Zygmunt. (1989). *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Bolen, Jean Shinoda. (2005). *Urgent Message From Mother: Gather the Women, Save the World*. San Francisco: Conari.
- Crossroads Cultural Center website, events. (9/17/2011). Maria Yudina: The Pianist Who Moved Stalin. www.crossroadsculturalcenter.org/events/2011/9/17/maria-yudina-the-pianist-who-moved-stalin.html
- De Robertis, Carolina. (2012). *Perla*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. Interview with her about the novel at www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCG4KhjJmf8.
- Gobodo-Madikizela, Pumla. (2003). *A human being died that night: a South African story of forgiveness*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Goldhagen, Daniel J. (1996). *Hitler's willing executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: Knopf.
- Mann, Daniel & Sargent, Joseph. (Co-directors). (1984). *Playing For Time*. [TV film]. Los Angeles, CA: Media Home Entertainment.
- Milgram, Stanley. (Director). (1962). *Obedience*. [Documentary film]. New Haven, CT: Milgram.
- Miller, Alice. (1983). *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Oliner, Samuel P. & Oliner, Pearl M. (1988). *The Altruistic Personality: What Led Ordinary Men and Women to Risk Their Lives on Behalf of Others?* New York: The Free Press.
- Panh, Rithy. (Director). (2002). *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*. [Documentary film]. Brooklyn, NY: First Run/Icarus Films.
- Pearl, Michael & Pearl, Debi. (1994). *To Train up a Child: Child training for the 21st century*. Pleasantville, Tennessee: No Greater Joy Ministries.
- Ross, Carne. (2011). *The Leaderless Revolution: How ordinary people can take power and change politics in the 21st century*. New York: Blue Rider Press. London: Simon & Schuster. <http://theleaderlessrevolution.com/summary>.
- Sela, Ido. (1993). *Testimonies*. [Documentary film]. Israel: Amythos Media. Short version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUQIDwTdPcU>
- von Trotta, Margarethe. (Director). (2012). *Hannah Arendt*. [Film]. Germany, Luxembourg, France: Heimat Film + 7 other companies.
- Welzer, Harald. (2002). *Opa war kein Nazi* (Grandpa was not a Nazi). Frankfurt: Fischer.
- Ze'evi, Chanoch. (Director and Producer). (2011). *Hitler's Children* [Documentary film]. Israel: Maya Productions. www.hitlerschildren.com.