A Violin in Auschwitz: Finding Hope through Awe and Wonder

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SYNOPSIS

Hope is something which we all need in order to live, and which we all seek as we go about our daily lives – hope for our future as well as to encourage us through the despairs and difficulties we all contend with from time to time. This piece is a meditation on stories and philosophies of hope and awe which have inspired me, and which I believe might be an inspiration for others. We are all seeking that which can sustain us and bring us into the presence of the meaning we need in our lives – we are all listening for our own metaphorical 'violins in Auschwitz'.

In his book, *Moments of Reprieve*, Primo Levi writes of moments of beauty and peace in the midst of the horrors we all know that were Auschwitz. A story which resonated deeply with me was that of Wolf, a Berlin Pharmacist who 'secreted music as our stomachs secreted hunger'. Like many in Auschwitz, Wolf had scabies, yet he did not scratch. His scabies was doubted by another named Elias who taunted him, leading to a fight and Wolf being called 'Scabieswolf' or 'Krätzewolf', a nickname which persisted long after his scabies was healed.

Such was Auschwitz, a community of people who sometimes fought each other through times of despair but who also needed each other to survive. The stories Levi tells us speak of the moments those who suffered found and held on to, in order to survive. One particular episode happened after the Germans had left, when the only people left in the camp were a few hundred survivors – sick, starving and living in squalor, but hanging on to a hope that help would come:

> ...but from far away, we heard a new sound, a sound so improbable, so unexpected, that everyone lifted his head to listen. The sound was frail, like that sky and that sun. True, it came from far away but from within the boundaries of the camp. Some overcame their inertia and set out to search, like bloodhounds, running into each other with faltering steps, their ears pricked, and they found Mangywolf sitting on a pile of boards, ecstatic, playing a violin... Where he could have found the violin was a mystery, but the veterans knew that in a Camp anything can happen. Perhaps he had stolen it; perhaps rented it in exchange for some bread... A few steps away lay Elias, his belly on the ground, staring at Wolf almost spellbound. On his gladiator's face hovered that veil of contented stupor one sometimes sees on the faces of the dead, that make one think that they really had for an instant, on the threshold, the vision of a better world.

One can only imagine what the effect of hearing that violin had on those hoping to find hope when at times it must have seemed an impossibility. On reading the story, one has a sense of great beauty in that violin music – great beauty transcending the squalor and inhumanity that was Auschwitz. Through that music, Wolf had brought beauty into the despair that goes hand in hand with hope. For all those hearing the sound of that violin, there must have been a feeling of wonder – of awe – that such a beautiful sound should rise out of the depths of despair.

There have been other stories of such moments amidst despair. In Camus' novel *The Plague*, Dr Rieux and the journalist Tarrou, in the midst of death and despair, turn their backs on the city and go swimming:

> Rieux could feel under his hand the gnarled, weather worn visage of the rocks, and a strange happiness possessed him. Turning to Tarrou, he caught a glimpse on his friend's face of the same happiness, a happiness that forgot nothing.... For some minutes they swam side by side, with the same zest, in the same rhythm, isolated from the world, at last free of the town and of the plague.

Unlike stories of Auschwitz which are devastatingly true, Camus' novel is just that – a novel. Yet at the same time it can be seen as a metaphor for life, in which plagues in one guise or another come upon us all, both individually and collectively, and in which we all have both a private struggle and a collective one as part of humankind, working to get along and make sense of the world in which we live. We must all seek Levi's 'Moments of Reprieve' or should we call them 'Moments of Hope'?

So where do we find hope when it seems that there is none, or that we cannot find a way to reach it? What is it that sustains people in their darkest moments? For some it is faith. Primo Levi also tells the story of Ezra – a cantor from a synagogue in a remote Lithuanian village. In a place where food was equated with survival and where a piece of bread was worth as much as a new pair of shoes or a new jacket (figuratively speaking), Ezra refused food. It was Yom Kippur, one of the high holy days of Judaism and a day on which many Jews fast as they commune closely with God, face their sins and transgressions, and look deeply into who they are. Through a deep faith, he found the courage to ask the Kapo to save his rations until the next day. This was brave indeed, and a true sign that Ezra had an abiding faith which somehow, he knew, would sustain him.

Another Auschwitz writer who suffered in that camp, Viktor Frankl (who later founded a school of psychiatry known as Logotherapy), found hope in exercising his own freedom - the freedom to determine one's own attitude and spiritual well-being. No sadistic Nazi was able to take that away from him or control the inner life of Frankl's soul. One of the ways in which he found the strength to fight to stay alive and not lose hope was to think of his wife. Frankl clearly saw that it was those who had nothing to live for who died quickest in the concentration camp. He noticed that those most likely to survive their ordeal were those 'who knew that there was a task waiting for them to fulfill'.

Without hope, what do we have? If we do not believe we have a task to fulfill, then what do we have? Medical professionals know the importance of sustaining hope in the fight against any disease, be it of the mind or body. Tell someone they have cancer and hope temporarily evaporates. It is crucial to urge hope at such times. It is time to gather together hope and to do battle against a vicious monster. Whatever must be faced – surgery, radiation or chemotherapy – there must always be the sustaining hope that the treatments will do some good. For the one who fights other illnesses, both mental and physical, too, there must be a sustaining hope that there is some way out, some way to feel good about life again, that they will feel engaged and that, as Frankl taught, their life has some purpose.

Paul Tillich, in a sermon at Harvard's Memorial Church in March 1965, said that he believed nobody can live without hope, even if it were only for the smallest things which give some satisfaction even under the worst of conditions, even in poverty, sickness and social failure. Without hope, the tension of our life towards the future would vanish, and with it, life itself. We would end in despair, a word that originally meant 'without hope', or in deadly indifference. He asked whether we have a right to hope. Is there justified hope for each of us, for nations and movements, for mankind and perhaps for all life, for the whole universe? Do we have a right to hope, even, against hope?

It is easy to read these words and to agree that without hope, as Tillich says, we would end in despair; but where, or what, is hope? Where do we look? Indeed, what do we look for in seeking hope? It can be found in faith as for those like Ezra the cantor, but for those for whom faith is a struggle and when hope is needed, sometimes desperately so in the face of the struggle to keep on living, where can we look?

Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote:

> We may doubt anything, except that we are struck with amazement. When in doubt, we raise questions; when in wonder, we do not even know how to ask a question. Doubts may be resolved, radical amazement can never be erased. There is no answer in the world to [our] radical wonder. Under the running sea of our theories and scientific explanations lies the aboriginal abyss of radical amazement. (*Man Is Not Alone*, p. 13)

Is this radical amazement of which Heschel speaks, the hope we all seek? Is hope found in our embrace of the wonder of the life we are faced with but which we often cannot see? Heschel goes on to suggest, 'the beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to

believe but a will to wonder'. (*Man Is Not Alone*, p. 37) I would like to suggest that Heschel's wonder and radical amazement are akin to hope – the beginning of happiness lies in the understanding that life without hope is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to hope, and we must know where to begin to look for that hope.

If we can understand, and perhaps even agree, that hope is the same as Heschel's radical amazement, then we must look outside ourselves to find it under the running sea of theories and scientific explanations.

Kirk Schneider in his book on *Rediscovery of Awe* walks hand in hand with Heschel's radical amazement, and exhorts us to believe that the existence of creation at all is magnificent, and that no dimension of it is exempt from that magnificence: 'One of life's primary allures is the magnificence of creation... The span of humanity's hope matches precisely the reach of magnificence.' That magnificence – that hope – can be found wherever we choose to behold it, even outside of any spiritual or religious belief – in the cosmos, in nature, in the architecture of a beautiful city, in ourselves, and even in those precious moments glimpsed occasionally amidst squalor, such as the violin in Auchwitz. It is there but for our own reaching.

When I think of reaching for hope, I imagine myself standing in awe of something greater than I. For me this often happens in nature, but for every individual it can happen in those places where they feel most at home – in a city, in a place that holds special memories, even sometimes on a plane looking out over the clouds below, tinged with the rays of a dawn breaking or the sun setting. When I feel that, it feels as if I am in the presence of something or someone more expansive than I. William James referred to what I believe this to be as the 'More'. In the context of our human to human relationships, Martin Buber referred to this as an 'Other'. He defined man as being one who faces an 'other' with whom he can connect.

'Awe' – 'Other' – 'More'– are they not all the same as 'Hope'? Without hope we cannot find the 'More' or 'Other', and without either or even both of those, we cannot recognise the magnificence of life – the 'Awe' in which we can all stand, if we but choose to.

What, then, if you cannot imagine yourself standing before anyone or anything? When you cannot be present to the 'More' or even to an 'Other', Martin Buber takes his belief in the otherness of relationships further to embrace a presence that is present when man is fully in community with another. He says, 'For those who are not present, there is no Presence.' Although we do all need each other to survive, this 'Presence' does not necessarily have to be with another human being. Those who had really *heard* the violin at Auschwitz, such as Elias who lay spellbound, had found Buber's 'Presence'. For a fleeting moment that music became their 'Other' – their 'Hope' that a new and fulfilled life might be in front of them, and that they could survive the pain and suffering they had experienced. S

Katie Wood writes: Born and raised on the Sandringham Estate, where my father was vicar until his death in 1971, after boarding school I trained as a nurse specialising in Oncology. After caring for cancer and AIDS patients, I moved into the R&D side of the Pharmaceutical / Biotech industry, in which I've worked in many countries on development programmes for 18 years. I currently work in the USA as a Clinical Science Specialist in a large pharmaceutical company, working on novel therapeutics for cancer. Interests beyond work are exploring nature, as well as in reading, writing and philosophy. My own journey has led me to the great existential questions of life and its meaning, as well as questioning deeply where that meaning might be found.

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