

Neurology & Pain Management

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Sanity Pain and Language

"Even the enlightened person remains what he is, and is never more than his own limited ego before the One who dwells within him, whose form has no knowable boundaries, who encompasses him on all sides, fathomless as the abysses of the earth and vast as the sky." (Answer to Job, par. 758)

C.G. Jung

Celan's PSALM

**No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,
no one conjours our dust.
No one.**

**Praised be your name, no one.
For your sake
we shall flower
Towards
you.**

**A nothing
we were, are, shall
remain, flowering:
the nothing-, the
no one's rose.**

**With
our pistil soul-bright,
with our stamen heaven ravaged,
our corolla red
with the crimson word which we sang
over, O over
the thorn.**

Step 2 of the 12 Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous suggests and claims: "we came to believe that a Power greater could restore us to sanity"

Pain makes one insane. Four weeks now exactly. Deep gnawing aching pain worse through the night. Pain makes one insane. My question remains what kind of insanity are we speaking of here.

So let us begin with definitions. Webster's.

Main...Entry_: **in·san·i·ty**
Pronunciation::in-'sa-n&-tE
Function::noun
Inflected..Form(s)::plural:-**ties**

1 : a deranged state of the mind usually occurring as a specific disorder (as schizophrenia)

2 : such unsoundness of mind or lack of understanding as prevents one from having the mental capacity required by law to enter into a particular relationship, status, or transaction or as removes one from criminal or civil responsibility

3 a : extreme folly or unreasonableness **b** : something utterly foolish or unreasonable

Insane behavior is characterized by a belief that repeating the same self-destructive acts would somehow result in a different outcome. We do not need to list the ways we respond to psychic and physical wounds in ways that are so destructive, thinking the next time around the end result will be different!

Yet Step 2 in recovery, suggests that after admitting powerlessness over one's life, one's addictions, one's rage and anger, one's work schedule, one's lack of personal time and reflection and meditation, over the bloody pain that will not remit despite all the best medical devices and technology -X rays CT scans and MRI's- and admitting how one's life had become unmanageable, one was now in a position to turn that life and will over to a *Higher Power* in step 3. The step between the admission (Step 1) and the action steps of turning over one's life and power (step 3, 4, 5 etc.) was this mysterious step 2 called "coming to believe".

"We came to believe that a Higher Power could restore us to sanity"

All my life my vision of this "Power Greater" was the Old Testament Lord, who punished the wicked and rewards the righteous. Yet I never felt included in the club. Not one of the saved I guess. My view of God was always a punishing Protestant deity with reward and punishment the credo of the day. At times I felt Him somewhat accepting however, but this required sincere effort and purification. He was a God who may not have accepted my failures and anyway cared only rarely. Mostly silent and often absent and uninvolved I was left alone much of the time in that void and silence. Clearly these responses had some correlation with feelings I had about the earliest caregivers in my life!!!

In my own spiritual recovery I have struggled with the demands of this step in redirecting and re-imagining a divine being that might be more benevolent and unconditionally loving. I so wanted to be able to trust and put my faith in Him and turn over my life to His care. A God who actually forgave me since I was so terminally unique (!) My sins were also beyond forgiveness! A God not of my own invention mind you, rather the God of the mystics like Rumi and Hafez, Meister Eckhardt, John of the Cross and the Baal Shem Tov.

Sometimes more successfully than others the path Hassidut/Mysticism has helped me with its (Breslov) insistence on a manual of spiritual discipline such as the rituals and constant demands for *devekut*, or connectivity with God, ritual purity and constant *birur* or self analysis. Through the power of a Master or Rebbe I was somehow able to feel hope in this endeavor that hitherto for decades had left me feeling constantly guilty.

I'm still torn between the non-philosophical stance Breslov demands (even resisting all speculative attempts at understanding the world cognitively) and the philosophical implications of this belief. The Holocaust and modern genocide has thrown out all prior theological claims in the ashes and smoke of a million babies. How can one believe after this event, after the twentieth century of mass slaughter, after such debasement in the value of the human soul? It defies the imagination. The world has become demonic if not absurd. All texts even sacred texts become meaningless in the face of the horror and the indifference of the civilized world. All claims to truth and humanism went up in the smoke. We are living in a nightmarish world where people claim belief but the words are empty shells.

In this spiritual post-nuclear nightmarish world this particular step becomes even harder. Coming to believe in a *post-belief* landscape in a benevolent Higher Power stretches the moral fiber as well. How dare I allow myself the luxury of such belief? Did he come to the aid of my grandparents in Sobibor or Belzec.

George Steiner has eloquently mirrored my sentiments in a tribute to Elie Wiesel¹ by attempting to complexify the human/divine relationship using the image of paternity and commenting on Exodus 4.24. He wrote:

"and it came to pass by the way in the inn that the Lord met him and sought to kill him"

"I gloss this to mean that God suffers gusts of murderous exasperation at the Jews, toward a people who have made Him a responsible party to history and to the grit of man's condition. He may not have wished to be involved: the people may have chosen Him, in the oasis of Kadesh, and thrust upon Him the labors of justice and right anger. It may have been the Jew who caught Him by the skirt, insisting on contract and dialogue. Perhaps before either God or living man was ready for proximity. So as in marriage, or the bond between a father and child, there are moments when love is changed to something very much like itself, pure hatred."

In this post holocaust essay this voice of sanity midrashically misreads the text to suggest that we are the people who decided on our own chosenness for better or worse and suffered the consequences of insisting on a relationship with the divine. Entering such relationships are fraught with dysfunctional implications including the murderous rage of the more powerful partner.

So how do I reconcile my philosophical resistance to believe with the demands of step 2?

My perception and my relationship to God must be informed by the paradoxical state of His total absence yet the in His absolute immanence. In this space of emptiness where God is apparently absent indifferent or worse cruel, the test of faith remains as always whether the trial was Abraham and Isaac, the Ten Martyrs, the Hurban , Chmelnicki Gonta or Holocaust as to continued Presence and Providence in this world. In Haddisut we are taught by master such as the Izbice (Rabbi Leiner) and the Rebbe Reb Nachman how to train ourselves to see God in the vacuum of this-worldliness even of the demonic, for there is *no place devoid of Him*.

Relevant here is a comment by Hasidic master Rabbi Jacob Leiner of Izbica in his gloss to the Passover Haggadah. The Haggadah contains numerous rabbinical liturgical inventions coupled with literary (midrashic) renderings of biblical verses, all focused on the story of the Israelite exodus from Egypt. One of the early liturgical flourishes in the Haggadah says: "Blessed be the place (*makom*), Blessed is He. Blessed be the one who gave Torah to Israel His people."

The use of the term *place* to describe God is based on a rabbinic midrash from the third century

¹ Language and Silence , George Steiner Yale University Pres 1998, "A Kind of Survivor" 140-154

(Genesis Raba, chapter 61). It reads, "Why is it that we use place as a name of God? It is because God is the place of the world but the world is not His place." Rabbi Jacob comments:

“ This means that God gave a place to all of his creations, even the most lowly, and their existence remains His concern as the Talmud teaches "in the very same place that you find God's greatness you find His humility" (Babylonian Talmud Megillah 31b). No good act or thought by a human being is lost on God— God has a place for all of them. . . . Yet God first had to create [the idea of] "place" (*makom*), for if there was no place where would they exist? . . . This is why God is called "place" because He gives a place for all His creatures. “

This concept of place is one that suggests a seeming infinitude of space. As there is never any space void of God, there is never a place that excludes God's creatures. The God who gives the Torah to Israel is the God who creates infinite space for all of creation. The Torah takes up some of that space, but, as it is traditionally viewed as the word of God, the Torah must also have the potential to create space.

Reb Nachman² struggled personally and philosophically with evil in all its manifestations and using the mythology of the Zohar and the Ari z'l taught his disciples how to deal with klippa and the evil within. Unlike his predecessors in the Hassidic tradition above as well as the classical kabalistic texts they relied on, he broke radical new ground by suggesting an innovative paradoxical approach to God's immanence and transcendence. In Torah I:64 of *Lekutei Mehoran* he suggests that the absence of God in the *chahal hapanui* was not fully filled by the divine light sent back into the vacated space. The void is experienced as God's very absence in human experience. The heresy depicted in that Torah of the second type has no apparent fixing inasmuch that there is no philosophical response to the heresy of His absence. Only through the Tzaddik or the master Gardner (Torah I: 65) can such thoughts be rescued and only through the dialectic of faith despite the very absence of the experience of God, can true prayer succeed. Unlike the Ari'zal or his followers the void takes on a personal experiential character rather than a philosophical place and the human being feels not the absence of God's presence rather the presence of God's absence.³

The texts of prayer, the texts of Torah which used to reflect an ontological reality map no longer carry the same meaning. How do I read such texts and pray for them in relating to a divine paradox!

Shaul Magid mused about living with texts in such a post-Holocaust reality:

What about those lost texts that have no meaning? Reb Shlomo Carlebach was teaching in Boston close to his untimely death. As it was late summer, after Tisha B'Av, his words turned to the destruction of the Second Temple and Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai's courageous (yet problematic) decision to abandon the Temple and take his disciples to Yavneh to build an institute of Torah that would become the backbone of rabbinic Judaism, a new direction for Judaism that is arguably what saved the Jewish people from obscurity. It is significant that the context of this discourse revolved around Shlomo's soulful rendition of the verse in Psalms "Sing to God a new song." "How could it be," Shlomo asked, "that with

² Rabbi Nachman, a descendant of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder Hasidism, taught in the late 1700's through the beginning of the 1800's in the Ukraine. His teachings, which ascribe extraordinary significance to what we would call existential emotions, were unique in Hasidism and in Jewish history. He was known for his practice of praying in the field, which he called "hit'bod'dut," the realization of aloneness for the sake of coming closer to God. Rabbi Nachman, in the tradition of Jewish mysticism, believed that God's presence is manifest at all levels of creation. This teaching is central principle of the Kabbalah, on which Hasidism is based: "*Layt atar panui minayh!* There is no place empty of Him." (Zohar III:225a) For Rabbi Nachman, meditation and prayer (as opposed to the *hitbooneut* discipline of the CHABAD masters) helped to reveal this divine aspect in all things.

³ Magid, Shaul, "Through the Void" Harvard Theological Review 88: 495-519 1995

all the Torah that was being studied and all the great luminaries in Europe, this tragic event [the Holocaust] could have occurred?" After a long pause, he answered his own question softly, as if to himself. "Perhaps," he said, "**the Torah being studied there was not good enough, perhaps we need a new Torah.**" He then launched into "Sing to God a new song."⁴

I yearn to contribute to this new Torah, the new song he mentioned. This Torah will have to inter-include the absence of God even His cruelty with our utter commitment to the relationship despite everything. It will mean a new Midrash a new narrative myth that must include women's spirituality, the notion of human brotherhood and eco-sensitivity to the divine nature of the planet and its resources. Above all it will need to shout and scream against torture genocide child slave labor and child prostitution. This new ethic is the only hope for the future. We cannot regain the lost central European humanism. It is lost forever. Only the fear of God can now overpower the demonic forces of evil in the world as Heschel stated. For me recovery of the lost world of texts must be accomplished for the future generations. We must add our voice to the thousand year old textual tradition since we are the People of the Book and the logos must be recovered and discovered anew. Despite the loss of the word despite the emptying out of all meaning for a transcendence we still need to retain the shell the shard and the *kefi* for filling with new Torah, the messianic torah that will be unsullied by the demonic within.

If nothing else recovery work shows how powerful baffling and cunning the addict/demonic is within all of us. The Hitler/Nazi/ongoing genocide with my indifference other than listening to NPR is shocking. The banality of evil remains and is alive and well, now exercised and fuelled by the mass hysteria and addictions of the twentieth century. We need a giant 12 step program for all those who live in hate!

In my pain physical or emotional *I come to believe* in the only way I can, in the very paradox of belief, despite the world and the experience of horror, despite the sleepless nights, I come to believe that there is a deeper meaning despite all this absurdity. This is the gift of mysticism. This is the gift of the paradoxical Rebbe. This kind of God I could possibly turn my life and will over to since he encompasses the very complexity and mirror of our humanity.

If this be the God of my forefathers then I am ready for step 2.

"We came to believe that a Higher Power could restore us to sanity"

⁴ Magid, Shaul, Jewish Renewal: Toward a "New" American Judaism. By: Magid, Shaul. Tikkun, Jan/Feb2006,