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Philosophy With Tears: Gestalt "Study Buddies" Visit Dachau

Abstract: This collection of essays, written shortly after our study trip to Dachau, covers two principle themes. First, a questioning of both the existence and nature of "evil," and whether any of us could predict our actions in difficult situations. Second, recognition of the danger of descending into the malaise of meaninglessness, nihilism and "loss of horizon" that Taylor believes threatens modern human identity. He writes vividly, "the world loses altogether its spiritual contour, nothing is worth doing, the fear is of a terrifying emptiness, a kind of vertigo" (1992, p. 18). In what follows, we hope to give some sense of how our reading, and particularly our visit to Dachau informed our thinking and learning about these two themes. We raise ethical, political, theoretical and praxis implications for our work as Gestalt psychotherapists and world citizens.

The following collection of essays invites the reader into an on-going group conversation. The essays emerge from our last conversation, our most intense, emotionally difficult, and possibly most humbling and enriching. Since you join us *in medias res*, the intent of this introduction is to provide some context that may help the reader understand some of our references to the readings and each other, and some of the emotional tones of our writings.

Five years before our trip to Dachau, a group of Gestalt therapists gathered on the living room floor at Gordon Wheeler's Boston home for a book study project. Prior to this first meeting, we had read Charles Taylor's (1992) tome, *Sources of the Self.* The group of nine included folks from Britain, the United States of America, Germany and one peripatetic fellow from France/India.[1] We met annually, generally for three days each time. In the interim, we read books that we had decided upon at the previous meeting.[2] Somehow, the moniker, "studies buddies" was born in our email exchanges and it endured. Gordon had said at our first meeting that philosophy without tears was not worth much. Our group evolved into a meeting style we came to call, "philosophy with tears." Needless to say, there were plenty of tears at our last meeting, which included our trip to Dachau.

Three members of our original group were unable to attend the meeting in Germany. And one new member had joined us, Jim Denham-Vaughan, Sally's husband. Most of us were apprehensive about this particular gathering. We had decided to focus on the notion of evil. This is an incredibly difficult topic, not just for its emotional intensity. Like the concept, "self," it is impossible to grab hold of as an essence. And it is an

[1] The members were: Sally Denham-Vaughan, Mark Fairfield, Lynne Jacobs, Lillian Norton, Malcolm Parlett, Rudi Schmitz-Perrin, Frank-M. Staemmler, Carol Swanson, and Gordon Wheeler.

[2] For those who are interested, we have included a complete listing of our chosen readings at the end of our essays (see "Additional References").

ethical concept, not a psychological one, hence difficult to think about in psychological terms without reducing evil to being "merely" psychological.[3]

The decision to visit Dachau had been emotionally charged for each of us in different ways. Some wondered if they could bear the visit. Others were moralistic about the necessity to bear witness. Frank felt a sense of responsibility as a German, to bear witness and to support others to learn from his country's history. By this time, our group history had included some difficult process discussions, most of which had evolved with courage and grace. But this tear-filled discussion, happening informally as we stood around in Gordon's Santa Cruz kitchen, evolved very little past each of our first statements of our emotionally charged perspectives. So while the topic of evil, and the anticipation of visiting Dachau contributed to our apprehension, our awkwardly "unfinished" first conversation, in which some folks felt righteous and others felt shamed and ashamed (and some felt a mix of the three), was also part of the ground as we gathered in Germany.

We chose four books to read (listed in the references). Wheeler's translated version of the *Collective Silence* (Heimannsberg & Schmidt, 1993), a collection of stories by therapists about their patients and their families and how family involvement in the Nazi times shaped the present-day therapeutic conversation, was a straight-forward way to begin to get a narrative sense of the fracturing and discontinuity that haunts many German families, whether the family stories are those of victims or perpetrators. One also got a sense of how difficult it was to build and tell the stories, how inhibited the Nazi generation is about telling their stories, and how inhibited the next generation is about knowing, or about upsetting family members in an effort to know. It is reminiscent of how our unfinished conversation hung in air, none of us able to take it to the next step.

We also chose a philosophy book, *Evil in Modern Thought*, by Susan Neiman (2002). It is an insightful, scholarly and fascinating journey through some of the history of Western philosophy and social critiques, which she believes can be best understood as an attempt to define and come to grips with evil and suffering. She divides theologians, philosophers and other thinkers into two groups: those who attempt to justify suffering as intrinsically meaningful, and those who believe that suffering and evil simply are as they appear. She bookends her study with the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, a challenge to thinkers who looked for meaning in suffering, and with the holocaust, a challenge to meaning *per se*. We used her writings to try to understand what could be said about evil from as many vantage points as possible. With an eye towards our intended trip to Dachau, we looked upon the holocaust as an exemplar of evil in modern times.

We read Zimbardo's (2007) *The Lucifer Effect*. In the early 1970's, Zimbardo, an American social psychologist, designed and ran the Stanford Prison Experiment. He recruited graduate students and randomly assigned them to be either prisoners or guards for a two-week experiment on prison life. He ended the experiment early because the "guards" were becoming

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[3] In his treatise, "Guilt and Guilt Feelings," Buber (1948/1999, p. 115) warned us against denuding our ethics by trying to account for guilt through subjectivism. This is an important corrective to a therapeutic inclination to reduce patients' guilt rather than help them to face their guilt, and to distinguish between guilt and anxiety about loss of love or anxiety about punishment, both of which are often confused with guilt.

increasingly sadistic towards the "prisoners." Zimbardo wanted to study whether personality factors or situational factors were the stronger influence on human behaviour. He found that situational factors were by far stronger than personality factors. The more extreme and totalistic the situation, the less personality factors seemed to come into play. To his own dismay he discovered he was not immune to the de-complexification of consciousness and the ethical dislocations that occurred in his experiment. His pursuit of his experimental data blinded him to the suffering in which he was participating as a perpetrator. He fell under the sway of his roles as "prison superintendent," and "primary investigator," and became callous and ruthless in ways uncharacteristic of his manner in his ordinary life. His tale confronts each of us with the humbling and sobering realization that we cannot count on anything we know about ourselves to predict how we might behave in extreme situations such as the holocaust, a war, or somewhat less extreme situations such as privation or social unrest.

In fact, several of us recounted, during our study group, situations in which we too had failed to live according to our ideals once certain competing factors (personal investments) came into play. We used our stories to try to tease out what were the characteristics of our actions that lead us to consider them as evil acts in the first place, and also to tease out what might be contributing factors to the perpetration of evil. Zimbardo and Neiman had pointed to several situational factors, among them: de-individuation of the actors, the assertion of a compelling mission that rendered individual suffering secondary to greater cause, charismatic leadership, and a system or bureaucracy that distanced the actors from the deleterious consequences of their actions.

Our final book was historian Anne Harrington's (1996) account of the history of the development of ideas about holism and Gestalt psychology in Germany. She traced the ideas up through the Nazi times, and illustrated how political and cultural contexts shaped the ideas. She also showed how the ideas not only emerged from class and cultural situatedness and political ideologies, but also were used by ideologues to justify their politics. Harrington demonstrates in both haunting and well-informed ways, how holistic notions can be pocketed for totalitarian purposes. This book has great relevance for Gestalt therapy theory, in that it poses a critique of our love of holism.

In most general terms, there were two major strands of holism. One strand was deeply conservative. Proponents of this strand viewed the whole as having priority in opposition to its component parts. The "health" or adequate coherence and functioning of the whole might require the eradication of component parts that appeared to be dissonant and detracting from the resolution of problem conditions faced by the whole. This mode of thought has a long history in German culture. Thus the Nazi's could easily use this conservative scientific theorizing as a justification for the eradication of gays, Jews, and other "undesirables (sub-humans)."

There was a much more liberal, democratic strand of holism. Its proponents were often Jews, and in any case, scientists who had to flee Germany (in some cases, after imprisonment). This view of holism holds that the coherence and adequate functioning of the whole requires a resolution of all its component parts. The exclusion of any part — even a part that appears at first look to be injurious — detracts from the resources

and adequacy of the whole. In social groupings, this means that every voice is taken to have a meaningful perspective to offer, the exclusion of which impoverishes the adequate functioning of the group. Obviously this view of holism is more complex and messy (and is congenial with the original anarchism of the founders of Gestalt therapy).

"Holism" is a word that in our tradition is applied both to the holistic character of a person, i.e. a term that tries to overcome the mind-body-split, and to the observation that a so-called "organism" cannot live and be understood without its respective "environment." This latter understanding of "holism," however valuable it may be, also lends itself more easily to usurpation by totalitarian ideas than the former. Harrington's book is a cautionary tale for Gestalt therapists, who sometimes seem to unthinkingly invoke the second kind of holism, without much awareness of its implications.

After having met together for two days in a lovely country village workshop site that Frank arranged for us, we trekked off to Dachau together. By this time we had struggled to define evil, we had struggled to grasp its characteristics, we had questioned ourselves about our own participation in evil actions (both intimately personal and broadly systemic/bureaucratic), and some wondered whether the concept of evil was even a useful notion, whether there was such a thing as evil.

When we returned from the journey, we spoke with a more visceral apprehension of the touch, smell, encompassing superimposition of evil. One cannot come back from such an experience unchanged. Our worlds have changed. Our essays reflect some of our efforts to grapple with the meaning of evil, morality and responsibility after our visit to Dachau.

Forecast: Uncertainty

(by Carol Swanson)

Frank speaks with conviction and certainty when Malcolm asks at breakfast the morning of our trip to Dachau Memorial Concentration Camp if it would rain. Frank says without hesitation: "The morning clouds, they will disappear, and there will be sunshine this afternoon. No, it is not going to rain."

The group is punctual. At 9:15 we are walking on the gravel in the driveway to the van. My body slides across the seat and I settle in with my tote bag filled with snacks, sunscreen, water bottle — everything but a rain jacket, since it is not going to rain today. The sliding door to the van shuts with a loud clang and our group of seven departs for our day trip to Dachau.

It starts raining somewhere en route to Dachau and we joke, "it is not possible."

Whatever foreboding I have about Dachau is countered by bright sunshine as we arrive in the parking lot. We agree to meet in several hours in front of the museum.

Lillian and I team up for a walk through the museum. We are captivated by the voice of an Irish tour guide and join his group. When we step out of the museum, it is drizzling. I am cool, and annoyed that I trusted Frank's voice of conviction and certainty. Perhaps the discomfort is fitting for my experience in Dachau. Who should be comfortable in Dachau?

The crunching sound of gravel under our feet echoes as we walk in silence along the road that runs the length of the thirty-four barracks that housed the prisoners. A wooden frame about six inches in height, outlines where each barrack used to stand, so this large open space looks like it could contain a series of low raised planting beds but with nothing growing in them. This open space leaves me cold and empty. I notice other folks wearing their jackets and sweatshirts. I want some of their protection. It has stopped raining now, so I ask Lillian if I could wear her rain poncho. She offers it to me. I am grateful for the protection of the pink poncho.

We continue walking in silence and stop at the electric fence surrounding Dachau. The guide speaks of how prisoners would run towards the fence and electrocute themselves on it. This knowledge offers me a strange moment of relief.

We cross over a narrow ditch on a small bridge to a separate area of the camp containing the crematorium and gas chamber. This area was kept separate so prisoners would not be aware that this was part of the camp complex "waste management" system. I stand frozen for a moment looking at the two buildings. Isn't waste management about recycling in brightly colored plastic bins, not burning bodies in a large oven?

In that moment everything about Dachau hits me as evil, from the train ride in conditions hardly appropriate for animals, to replacing names with numbers, to the brutal living conditions at the camp, and the random punishments that sometimes involved killing and death. Disposing of bodies and calling it "waste management," this is something about human nature I do not want to know.

Lillian and I move through the gas chamber and crematorium separately and then find each other and exchange wordless looks. We have no comment. As Neiman writes, "thought stood still" (2002, p. 256).

We start walking back to meet the rest of our group at our meeting point in front of the museum. The sound of crunching gravel with each foot strike echoes louder and louder. I feel nothing. I remember the quote by Jean Améry, the Austrian-Belgian writer who survived Auschwitz: "We did not become wiser in Auschwitz . . . nor did we become 'deeper' in the camps" (1977, p. 44).

What have I learned today at the Dachau Memorial Concentration Camp, but to always pack a rain jacket?

As we continue walking in silence with crunching gravel under our feet, a loud bell starts ringing. The ringing is unrelenting; I like the intrusive sounding bell that my ears cannot block out.

Rain — it is not possible today. We love to hate our weather forecasters when they get it wrong. We can make sense of "forecast calls for morning clouds and sunshine in the afternoon," but instead we get morning clouds, and afternoon rain. We can hate our weathermen when they call the weather wrong, but we do not call them evil. Yet, how do you make sense when ordinary people living everyday lives perpetuated more evil with less malice than civilization had previously known? How do you make sense of the systematic degradation and destruction of six million people? What is the response when you wander into an area of life, if that which should not have happened happens? And if only a simple rain jacket could protect you?

Was my experience at Dachau so impossible to understand that all I can claim to have learned is to bring a rain jacket!? There are moments this statement feels true. To enter into this world of evil that threatened my capacity to trust and orient myself to the world can leave me thinking there is no meaning, no reliable ground to walk on. If this is true, how do I go on, with or without my rain jacket? Hannah Arendt said the impossible became true (see Neiman 2002, p. 238), and "Lyotard compared it [the holocaust — C. S.] to an earthquake that destroys not only lives and buildings but the instruments used to measure the quake itself" (*ibid.*, p. 251).

I wanted protection — not merely from the rain, but from a feeling of dread, the profound (mostly unaware at the time) feeling of depression and helplessness as I walked through Dachau camp.

What I do understand is that evil exists — not as a face or with any essence or intrinsic properties. I cannot define it, but its consequence is real. This matters. Exploring the concept and problem of evil has changed my relationship to my understanding of myself. What's more, my willingness to enter deeper into my experience of dread, loss, and emptiness has enabled me to have some partial and very incomplete understanding of what the others — the prisoners — experienced.

Bodies With a Face

(by Lillian Norton)

Today I walked on the ground of evil. Walking from the parking lot towards the entrance my body tensed with apprehension and anticipation. I was entering a place that I had never visited and yet the images from the liberation of the camps have haunted me since my childhood. I first saw the newsreels when I was about seven or eight. The piles of bodies were horrifying but what is seared into my memory are the living. Looking like dead but still living and breathing and moving. Able to walk, perhaps say a few words if necessary but mostly stare vacantly, yet not willing, or able to do what is necessary to end life. Nothing in the approach to the entrance bespoke of this, no hint of the pain, the torture, the way of life inside. So far this was all vague, built on an accumulation of images and stories over my lifetime.

We first see the landing area, the remains of the platform and train tracks. This is where the men were unloaded. The area looks quiet, it is hard to find the tracks and only the remains of the platform exist. The image is hard for me to capture, I have a growing sense of foreboding. The sign on the entrance gate reads "ARBEIT MACHT FREI," work sets you free. I feel the first shudder go though me. The view through the gate is of a wide-open space in front of the main building and a glimpse of the tower in the background. I can imagine the shadowy gray figures, rows and rows of men standing at attention, heads bowed, skeletal forms standing quietly — another shudder.

Then into the reception and processing areas, now a museum. This is stark and unadorned like the lives it was demanding us to see. Large displays of pictures and stories, vivid descriptions all focusing me more and more on the grim reality that was here. Stories of the victims and of the SS. I feel myself pulled into the lives of both victims and perpetrators. Now, I have little emotion. I am interested in the facts. Our guide is a passionate young Irish man. He is articulate and the information comes alive. He explains how the culture and situation for many centuries has culminated in this atrocity. He relates vividly the step-by-step protocol for dehumanizing, degrading, torturing mind and body of the inmates.

I learn of the deliberate and meticulous development of the systematic obliteration of any sense of humanity and the instillation in the hearts of the inmates of a fear so profound that it renders its victims unable to rebel, although some did at the cost of their lives through torture and experiments. But by far most succumbed to this systematic process of dehumanization. And who were the people who perpetrated such horrors? I would like to think they were sick, monsters, people without hearts. They were in fact some of the elite of Germany, well educated, culturally minded. They were fathers and sons and husbands and lovers. In another context, the solid citizens of their country.

I know this is a place of evil but where can I locate this evil? As I walk through the barracks, the first room has neat rows of wooden bunks with ample space for each prisoner. This was built in 1933 and used to show the diplomatic visitors how well the prisoners were treated. To the visitors all seemed well (Distel et al., 2005). There was plenty of space, showers,

prisoners diligently working at their places and all was meticulously clean, the floors polished to a glossy mirror finish. These visitors did not know of all the rules and harsh punishments and executions that instilled fear and compliance in the prisoners and so of course when seen at their workbenches they seemed involved in their tasks.

We move to the next room of 1938. Here it was more crowded, the water fountains were only for show, still not horrifying. Then the last room was barred off because allowing us in would not meet current safety standards. Here lived 700 men crowded together, beaten daily, tortured, and degraded.

I feel disoriented — caught in a time warp — sometimes past and sometimes present. I look for my colleagues to ground me in the present. I am successful at first but as we stay longer they too are drawn with me into the past. We are all in that world together; immersed in the evil we are studying and grappling with. How do I understand this? Is it understandable? I would like to think I would have acted differently, heroically, but . . . there is the very real possibility that I would have been like the other citizens, oblivious, not knowing, not wanting to know. What would I do? Would I be able to live with knowing and being helpless? Would I be vocal with my concern and risk the scorn of my peers, risk my life? Of course I can now hope I would do the 'right thing' but in the moment how would I know the 'right thing'? Would it be to protest and perhaps risk my life and the lives of my family members? To be silent and live with the guilt? Maybe it would be better to not know and not recognize what is going on around me. Do I really have a choice or will circumstances of my present life and history dictate what I do?

We move out to the area of the barracks. Only two remain standing. The sky is gray and the quiet is pervasive. The visitors are walking silently, not much conversation, I too walk silently trying to capture the feeling of the camp and afraid I will do that and feel the helpless despair that in my fantasy is the prevalent feeling here. We walk past rows and rows of trees and markers indicating where the barracks were. There is a group of nuns holding a service at barrack 27. This was where most of the priests were held. I met them back in the shower room when we saw what remained of the racks for 'pole hanging' a torture especially earmarked for the priests. They were rounded up for protesting the treatment of others and paid painfully, with their own lives, after their bodies were tortured.

The images are becoming more and more vivid. We move past the perimeter fence and ditch and I can see the shadows of the desperate men running into the electric fence to end their agony. Especially in those last years these men were worked to death. Why feed or care for them when they were so easily replaced. Trainloads and truckloads of people were constantly arriving to add to and replace those who could no longer endure, who could not work and so were exterminated. We see the old crematorium. An innocuous looking building. Two ovens to get rid of the dead. Soon this was not enough; new ovens had to be built, six could not take care of the dead. They were piled up in rooms and outside. Piles of bodies waiting cremation — "waste management" as it was referred to by the Nazis (Distel et al., 2005).

Horrible as that image is, what haunts me more is the thought and realization that each of these bodies had a face, each endured the agony of camp and each was a person with hopes and fears, family and friends, each

worked and played and enjoyed life as best they could. They each had a story and thoughts and feelings and dreams and dreads. All this was taken from them and though I shudder at the enormous numbers, and horrors of dehumanizing and exterminating so many, I shed my tears for each individual who I will never really know and can only imagine.

I live with the vague sense of guilt and hope that this could never happen again . . . but it has, in other ways, in other places.

Staying Silent

(by Malcolm Parlett)

After months of reading, we have begun our wrestling with what 'evil' means. Is it simply an extreme version of the unethical, immoral, degenerate, or unrighteous? Or does the word connote something more? The question absorbs me. By the eve of our visit, I venture that the word may even be a 'thought-stopper,' an over-simplified summary word that has lost much of its meaning. Does it really exist, other than as a religious or quasi-religious construct? Within half an hour of entering Dachau, I have undergone an immense shift. I realise I have been glib and avoidant: Evil existed here and it is no mere concept. It once saturated the camp, and seems still to cling to the shabby cement walls, 63 years on.

I have a reaction as I go through the entry gate: A body memory comes back from when I used to visit a friend in an American federal prison. The embodied reminder is of how everything changes as one crosses the entry line, even for a visitor: cancellations of power, threats of sanctions, and bureaucratic reductions of personhood, all part of an institutional system contained within an enclosed space filled with deliberate intention. I imagine myself having been arrested in, say, 1941, as a member of a despised minority. These attempts to grasp what happened mingle with flashbacks from my own prison visiting: feelings of resentful acquiescence, and suppressing of impulses to protest. Of course, there is vast difference between the Californian prison and Dachau concentration camp. However, the presence of the perimeter wall and the observation towers, as well as being a 'visitor' in both places, seems enough to create an echo — and also allows me a point of access into the otherwise unimaginable.

As I walk slowly through the museum, I shake my head, as if in disbelief. What words suffice — vicious, systematised, condoned, sadistic, barbaric? Any or all of these words apply . . . Even though I have read about the camps, being here is different. I grasp after words and fall back on, yes, evil: It condenses the experience. I accept the 'old language' for its gravity, its silent, formidable truth.

Dachau was a testing ground, a place of Nazi R and D. Opened shortly after Hitler came to power, it became an SS stronghold, where the rule of law disappeared, abuse was refined, and brutality extended as deliberate policy. I realise the systemic nature of the evil, yet I also note how savagery arose as a result of individual human actions. Ultimately, a person, and not anything as abstract as a system, wielded the whip, broke bones, kicked someone to death, or inflicted specific acts of torture in the guise of medical experiment. Equally, those prisoners who stood against the system, usually dying for doing so, or worked heroically to save fellow sufferers; and others who collaborated and betrayed, were also making individual choices.

Afterwards, back where we are staying, I keep on thinking of the people trapped in this hell, deliberately organised by other human beings to overwhelm, degrade, and destroy them. I stumble into familiar philosophical haunts about personal responsibility. Some exercised power and their choices were compliant and system-supported. Others, powerless, still had choices, albeit wrenchingly existential — like to run for the fence and be

shot, resist covertly, or play the system. But people always have choice, even with vast system pressures.

In the group, Frank voices surprise when I speak such ideas. What of my writing about field theory and the power of context to shape experience? Have I abandoned my belief in human beings as forever situated, their self-organising never proceeding in a private existential space apart? I am startled by the question, and realise I have become so overwhelmed in the appalling detail of Dachau, that I have bypassed my thinking about fields and contexts. Not least, I am absorbed in what would have been my own likely choices — either as guard or inmate. Frank's question returns me to the safer realm of abstraction.

The old free will/determinism debate continues, but is it not obvious that we are *both* socially constructed through and through, *and* that we can experience the act of choosing? Thus, an SS guard and a Jewish or gay man he is abusing are both caught in the 'same/different' environment, albeit experiencing the encompassing system in starkly contrasting ways. Moment-by-moment each operates alone and in relation — one (cast in a particular role) strikes the other (in another role), with greater or lesser force; the receiver of the blow may cry out or bite his lip to silence his pain. Each responds to his present situation within the special context, and in so doing reveals his practised patterns, including his choosing, his sense of himself, his values and entitlement. He is also imagining how the other party is framing the shared encounter. Remember, too, that the violence is occurring here, not in a schoolroom or a seedy backstreet, even though embodied memories of violence experienced earlier in life — for both oppressors and the oppressed — must have been evoked as well as drawn upon as precedents.

The usual arguments strike me as dualistic and naïve: Free will promotes hyper-individualism, determinism reduces humans to robots. Unpacking multiple influences acting in a situation is inevitably complex. Our focus in Gestalt therapy theory is on field, transcending the dualism and acknowledging a more complex, reversible, multiply influenced situation — one where human beings and their surroundings are considered together, not apart; and in flux, not in presumed steady states. Thus, all factors can play a part in what happens at any one time and place — an evocation of an event long ago, a present system constraint, accumulated patterns, or moments where surprises can happen against seeming probabilities — like moments of grace or *kairos*.

I am left with another thought. Acting as Gestalt practitioners, we have it in our power to act in ways that harm others, for instance by reducing the other from a Thou to an It, and thereby set off down the path to evil. Initial steps occur through thoughtlessness, neurotic patterns, crossing a boundary, stereotyping others, or self-righteousness. While Evil with a capital E can easily be confined to Dachau-like horrors, it is evil with a small e that we are more likely to encounter in everyday working and personal life, and we can fail to regard it in all its complexity, or choose not to confront it at an early stage. In short, though we are supposedly field-aware and know about co-created situations, the knowledge does not inoculate us against sometimes falling into grosser, over-simple ways and views, just like anybody else. Striving to act impeccably and with greater field awareness does not prevent us from sometimes forgetting the best of what we know, especially when stressed or off-centre. When we consider 1933-45 Germany, it is easy to

judge those who stayed silent or unprotesting, or who got caught up in collective depravity against their better impulse. But in judging, we can also forget the slippery slopes that any of us can slide down.

Writing about Dachau is one thing. Being there is another. It is gratifying the museum exists, and that so many visit, many in a spirit of pilgrimage, so that the potential silence of forgetting or denying is broken again and again. However, there is another meaning of staying silent. Immersed in both worlds — 2008 and 1933-45 — and impacted at a felt sense level, silence helps to cope with the enormity of my reactions; conversation can disperse feelings. Towards the end of the visit, I find the chapel tended by a silent order of Carmelite nuns to be the place where the deepest silence reigns — silence as a means of staying with rather than deflecting from, as a support for integrating. Passing through the entrance gate again, this time from inside to outside, I am still carrying the silence within me, even as I feel the relief of departure.

Being Accountable

(by Lynne Jacobs)

"I think I know what it might have felt like to be a well-intentioned German during the Nazi times." I wrote these words to Frank on the eve of the American invasion of Iraq. Five years later I was walking around KZ Dachau, thanks to the field trip he had arranged for our study group.

One of our texts was a study by historian Anne Harrington (1996), tracing the intellectual history of holism and gestalt psychology in Germany, and how one major strand of holistic and gestalt thinking had provided a veneer of scientific respectability to the Nazi worldview. A chilling and sobering read.

It made me reconsider an argument I posited a few years earlier in "Ethics of Context and Field" (Jacobs, 2003). In that article I averred that field theory supported the "politics" of dialogue, inclusion and care. Harrington's book showed me the dangers of that argument. Field theory, holism and other cherished epistemologies can be used for good or for ill. Levinas' assertions ring true to me now; "first there is the face" (Lévinas, 1969[4]). One's ethics precedes one's epistemology, and shapes the usage to which one's epistemic position will be put.

"First there is the face." This mantra haunted my visit to Dachau. I looked at the faces in photos. Those of the suffering, tortured, soon-to-be-dead inmates, and those of the administrators, doctors and guards. The first time I remember seeing photos of faces of the holocaust, I was eleven years old. A collection of men and boys in ragged striped uniforms clustered behind barbed wire, some staring into the camera, others looking around mournfully, some with eyes averted. Emaciated, bald, they looked like apparitions to me, not like human beings who had desires, loves, the same basic needs as I had. I stared back at those faces. I imagined that I was a guard. I thought to myself that I could easily kill these people who were no longer people to me. I could not see the humanity in the bedraggled collection of misery. Suddenly I was awash in powerful guilt and shame. That appalling moment of revelation was a touchstone that has guided my ethical life. I realize now that in my encounter with those faces, I encountered my own evil.

Many years ago, on an earlier Dachau visit, I summarized my experience as follows:

> All my life I had felt a vague sense of guilt about being alive, and was not very strongly attracted to being alive. Then I visited Dachau, and from the anguish of the experience, I emerged with an affirmation of life. I decided that the only true renunciation of Hitler was to live as vitally as possible, and not to let his destruction of other people destroy my meaningful life. (Hycner & Jacobs, 1995, p. 88)

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[4] "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face. This mode does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me" (Lévinas, 1969, pp. 50f.).

I had identified with the victims. I have enough Jewish ancestry that only the accident of history had allowed me to be a visitor to a Nazi KZ, not an inmate.

This second time, I went with our studies of evil reverberating through my body. Reverberations of the thin, contingent, unpredictable line between my capacity for evil and my capacity for good. I looked at faces. Could they move me differently now? All the faces, not just victims, but also the perpetrators, whom I might also have easily become? And then I met a live face, three dimensional, with a body and a voice. I was moving slowly through the *Appellplatz*. I had just come from visiting the Jewish memorial.

The architecture of the Jewish memorial grabbed my heart and twisted it into a wail of despair before I could catch my breath. One enters by walking down a path into a dark stone "dungeon." The dark rounded stones looked like skulls to me. A shaft of light touched the heavy rock dungeon floor. It emanated from the only opening, high in the conical roof, way out of reach of any who might wish to know of daylight again.

On the *Appellplatz* I overheard a married couple speaking in English. They looked a little disoriented. I approached, and full of my own recent experience, I asked if they had visited the Jewish memorial. The Wisconsin-born wife said they had, and were now looking for the archives. The husband, speaking with a European accent, told me that he wanted to find his name. He said that he had been here in Dachau those many years ago. Instantly, tears were flowing down my face. I was embarrassed, shy, worried that I was intrusive. Kind looks passed between us, but no other words than a choked, "I hope you find it." We parted. I wish I had stayed. I wanted to speak more with him, and yet no words, no interest, felt appropriate. As I reflect on it now, with tears as I write, I think maybe he wanted to find the written record of himself as a face before he became a number.

Hours later, back in our cosy meeting room, my colleagues spoke together of our experiences. We struggled with meaning, meaninglessness and meaningfulness, and in this group of dedicated, thoughtful people, we began to wrest words from the darkness that threatened to envelop me (and us?). I was grateful and filled with love as my colleagues, by their mere presence with their experiences, supported my heart to find words for mine. At one point we referred back to the philosopher Susan Neiman's discussion of Camus. Conversation turned to hopelessness, to despair, and to the Sisyphysian task of going on living and doing in a world in which meaning itself was exposed as a cruel trick. On the one hand, some forms of meaning seemed to betoken a strand of hope that might sustain one in a situation in which others aimed to break one's will by ruthlessly crushing the very idea of meaningfulness. On the other hand, meaningfulness was a powerful and chilling tool of destruction. The righteousness of the Nazified form of holism — built upon ideas that animate Gestalt therapists today — made the very idea of trusting in my world of meanings dangerous folly.

I resisted looking for some kind of hope. Radical contingency was all there was. No one of us could inoculate ourselves against capitulating to evil if circumstances test us. We only need look at what happened in America after the 9/11 attacks. Fear took hold, and Congress and much of the country lined up to sign away our democracy so that we could have "security." I too was afraid. I spoke of how on the second day that planes flew again, I heard that some passengers were prohibited from flying because

they looked "suspicious." I was torn. My ethical convictions led me to oppose such pre-emptive restrictions. However the gripping fear in my chest drew me to identify with the flight crew and the risk they were taking just by doing their ordinary jobs. I felt a shock of confusion and dismay at my moral equivocation.

I then realized that there was something that mattered to me, something that offered a sense of meaning in the face of my impotence of the moment. I blurted out that although I could not prevent my government from wreaking destruction on others, I have a commitment to having our country stand up and face the world. I am prepared to have the world (the injured and those who bear witness) hold us to account.

The Germans have taken that path since the *Nazizeit*. They have done so with an integrity that might serve as a beacon for my country. I hope so.

Ravishing Beauty:

In Our Darkest Hour What Will Sustain Us?[5]

(by Sally Denham-Vaughan)

I approached our visit to Dachau with growing reluctance and increasing shame at my perceived "weakness." There were echoes of other times when my courage and resolve to defend the good had failed me and instead, I had stood silently by — "by-standing" it is called. How reassuring a technical term can be. How shocking to read how most of Germany seemed not to have known about the death camps — how shocking to see that when faced with even this small cry for courage to act as witness, I am tempted to slip soundlessly away.

Instead though, I find myself travelling to Dachau in a minibus amid the unreal air of a trip with friends to a jolly picnic. We are entering the manifestation of our reading; talk about a juxtaposition of banality and evil. Indeed, Hannah Arendt had used exactly that word, "banal," to describe Eichmann at his trial. A nondescript civil servant intent on doing a good job, that in his case was ensuring smooth dispatch of Jews to death camps. I reflected uncomfortably on my own public sector employment: too distressing! I ate cake and drank coffee instead.

Walking around the main Dachau building was an assault of so many stories, bodies, systems and choices. If life could end like this, using human "reason" to systematise death and destruction on this scale, I saw how Neiman (2002) concluded that Reason can never give an account of Faith, and can never be trusted. Instead of building a modernist utopia, Reason had ended up building the Nazi death camps; manifestations that epitomise both religious and political disappointment and lead to despair for both justice and ethics.

I raged and wept my way around and then Lynne, you of all people, suggested we go and see the religious iconography on the site. I suppose it takes an atheist to suggest looking for God in such a God-forsaken place.

I cringed as I approached the Catholic crucifix. How could I look at this image and imagine a loving God, having just heard the Nazis hung their victims on crosses as a punishment for a dirty floor? Often they did it just for fun — not ever for redemption — but just to inflict more suffering.

I felt pain as I looked at you, Jim. You so long for God and I had so wanted in this place to be able to preserve something of that. I turned to my husband, the vitriol spat out: "Where's your God, your theology right now?"

Your answer to my question was resonant to me: "Maybe all we can hope is that there is light at the end of the tunnel." I thought of the Horkheimer (1970) article that Frank had given us, in which he speaks of the "longing for the other"; God as a process of hoping rather than a solution to pain or troubles. Taylor's "craving," that he finds "ineradicable from human life" (1992, p. 44).

We paused together and reflected on what had sustained us over the past difficult year. I realised that for me this was not "light at the end of a tunnel"

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[5] I am grateful to members of the Pacific Gestalt Institute Winter Residential community who, unknowingly, provided this title. I cannot recall who exactly coined this phrase, but it stuck in my mind and emerged as appropriate to this piece.

or the promise of better things to come. Instead an immediate present-centered sensual Beauty in its various flaming forms; the garden, the roses, the hills, our dog, friends, family and early morning birdsong. Never was I so glad that I had chosen an aesthetic form of therapy. I found myself agreeing with Nietzsche that there is no point, no goal or "meaning" to life. We are sustained by the experience of beauty, and a hope that we might be fortunate enough to have sufficient beautiful moments that we would chose to live our life again. The "*amor fati*"; but it proved so hollow to those who's lives ended in the death camps. Yet I found I could not reason for more.

Walking towards the Jewish memorial, I felt fully aware of the pain that people in Dachau must have endured, the despair and the slow erosion of hope that anything better, let alone beautiful, might sustain them.

The Jewish memorial is a small, grey, blackened pile of stones from the outside. Turning the corner, I realised that behind the low hump, is a tunnel down through the stones into the darkness; it looked like a pit, a grave, a soulless and empty place. The memorial was fitting so many images of that day and what we had seen; death and despair.

Yet, on entering I realised that at the end is a funnel of light and a single band of gold metal ascending from the floor to the ceiling; "light at the end of the tunnel." I looked at you again, Jim; here was the metaphor, the structure and the incarnation of what you had wished for. My reason cannot explain that experience, but it went someway to restoring my faith. And in the darkness, the light had an incredible beauty, with a seeming substance all of its own.

I went home and washed, I could not wait to scrub away the dirt and suffering of the day; to "sanitise" as you put it, Carol. I found myself reflecting on both the darkness and the light and how fortunate we are; those of us who can still hope and find beautiful things to sustain us.

Later that night, Frank, you raised the story of Sisyphus and the rock; a story that well summed up my sense of struggle in life to repeatedly push my various "concerns" uphill, even though I know that in all probability they will soon roll back down again. We discussed whether this was simply a habitual act that we undertake for want of something more meaningful to do.

On reflection however, I concluded that it is exactly this process of continuing to push against life's burdens that, in spiritual terms, can be described as faith. Within a psychological frame, we would define this as "resilience"; the quality of being able to sustain passionate engagement with life even when one has endured trauma and suffering. Increasingly, researchers such as Goodman and Scott (2005) are finding that this quality, which can be measured in even very young children, is predictive of mental health throughout life. It seems to defend against what Critchley and Bernasconi (2002) call "active and/or passive nihilism" — the tendencies to either destroy, deny or withdraw from a meaningless world.

Interestingly, and of great importance to us as therapists interested in the sustenance of ourselves as well as our clients, one of the strongest correlates with resilience is an interest in aesthetic pursuits such as the arts, music, or even gardening (Kuo, 2004).

So at the end of our group what have I learnt? That to endure, sustain and live well, I need to go gently with myself; to sublimate, or deflect from, my pain and focus on something more pleasurable and aesthetically pleasing.

Far from "staying with" my trauma and despair, I can choose not to stimulate these neural nets and focus instead on soothing and relaxing contact and connection. For Gestalt therapists this raises interesting questions about our core concept of the Paradoxical Theory of Change; increasingly research would seem to indicate that if you can avoid pain and suffering, you should.

This raises strong cautionary notes for those therapists who still insist on using cathartic and abreactive "re-experiencing" strategies; maybe listening to soothing music together would be more healing (see Staemmler & Staemmler, 2009, for a full overview of relevant research).

Finally, within this study phase, I have seen that human life often ends in despair. Yet the beauty of some moments means that, most commonly, we chose to go on living, resisting nihilism and shoring up our resilience. As John Keats, a philosophical romantic (like most of us in the Gestalt world) writes in *Endymion*:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing. (1818/1987, p. 59)

Dachau and the Death of God?

(by Jim Denham-Vaughan)

Can we put our faith in anything anymore? Susan Neiman (2002) in her book *Evil in Modern Thought* describes how the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 destroyed our trust in the goodness of nature, while the holocaust destroyed our belief in humanity. All attempts at theodicy came to an end after 1945. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" cries the ageless agony of man in Psalm 22; because "God is dead," retorts the philosopher. The atheist's bleak case looks strong, faced with the seemingly purposeless pain of existence. This essay searches for hope among the ashes of the holocaust, as we travel to the heart of darkness.

I was already feeling shame and a degree of trauma on the day we went to Dachau. A morning of mundane personal drama, with roots reaching back into childhood was still uncomfortably fresh in my awareness.

Shame: We go back a long way, yet I hardly know you, preferring at all costs to avoid our meeting. The discomfort of the urge to run and hide is strong, pushing me to seek isolation from the judgments projected into others' eyes. You are the barrier I put up to protect me from my self-disgust. Yet Malcolm, calmly sitting next to me in the bus, shows neither disgust nor judgment of his self-loathing neighbour.

We drink coffee in the car park of the concentration camp, and food in case we cannot stomach it on our return. Carol and Lillian start to sing "Springtime for Hitler" from the musical *The Directors*. It is a delicious moment, the warm Jewish humour of Mel Brooks' parody of Nazi hubris binding us together like refugees.

The path to the camp is through a building site, as though they are still repairing war damage. An arch with those ominous black iron gates, smaller than I'd imagined, has "ARBEIT MACHT FREI" shaped from the bars. An exquisite lie, was it meant to provide hope? Here freedom equalled death.

The camp looks innocent enough: a white gravel parade ground with wooden huts. Inside, the stone floors and white institutional walls protest their bureaucratic innocence. Yet here, the arriving prisoners were first inducted to the SS guard's brutality, designed for maximum humiliation.

Humiliation's daughters: guilt and shame.

I recall Buber's (1958) "Ich-Es," in contrast to the "Ich-Du" of contact. Deliberate humiliation renders "you" an "it." Lévinas (1969) describes our natural ethical response to 'the face' in its defenselessness, which signifies: "Do not kill me." What motivates the unnatural human desire to alienate and humiliate? Unethical acts leave us guilty.

The first exhibition details the rise to power of the Nazis, as the utopian 'New Beginning' of the Weimar Republic collapsed under the weight of reparations and economic crisis. The allies helped destroy the fledgling democracy. Yet, also there was German shame and widespread belief in a massive betrayal. Erskine (1995) notes how shame and impotent anger can lead to self-righteousness and the denial of the need for relationship. Was this then the source of alienation?

National Socialism's roots came from the desire for unity and holism, the very same roots as "gestalt" (Harrington, 1996). We learned the word: "Ganzheit," meaning "whole." These words cast long shadows. For German

nationalists, after 1918, 'alien' races, defectives and deviants became a threat to the integrity of the whole, a contaminant to be removed. Thus holism became hubris built on humiliation.

From the clashing of monolithic political forces, the exhibition unexpectedly turns to the personal effects, the treasured photos and mementos stripped from prisoners. Each prisoner became a number and a uniform with a coloured demarcation tag. Criminals were privileged over political prisoners, priests, homosexuals and, most despised, gypsies and Jews. The Nazis made victims complicit in their own oppression.

The punishments were severe and arbitrary. For a poorly made bed a prisoner was hung from a pole by the wrists in a half Nelson for one hour, often dislocating their shoulders. For insubordination, they were flogged, put into "the bunker"; a concrete hole too small except to crouch for 14 days, then flogged again (Distel et al., 2005). I think of the many brutal beatings and abuse suffered by the young Adolf Hitler at the hands of his father.

Degradation: fear, pain and hatred, beyond my ability to imagine.

I wonder about the experience of the SS guards: Their regimen was as strict as for the prisoners. Failure to shoot an escaping prisoner would result in arrest. Brutality was rewarded, leniency to prisoners punished. Zimbardo (2007) in the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) describes how ordinary students became sadistic in the role of guards; good apples turning bad in a culture of abuse.

Zimbardo (*ibid.*) also records how SPE prisoners lost awareness of existence outside the hell of prison life. How important must have been the small acts of kindness and courage by civilians at Dachau. A 17-year-old secretary smuggled out letters for the prisoners, and smuggled in food, risking her life. Such acts of kindness are like rays of hope.

As we regroup in the parade ground, Frank comes out of the shop carrying seven small carrier bags. He had bought each of us a copy of the exhibition book with an information CD-ROM (Distel et al., 2005): a small act of kindness, much appreciated.

Lynne remarks on the Jewish memorial; it is at the other end of the camp, but well worth seeing. So we set off, along the avenue of trees, visible as saplings in the photographs of Reichsführer-SS Himmler's visit in 1942. He'd vomited on witnessing the execution of Jews at Minsk; an embodied revolt. I recall Hannah Arendt's (1963) comment that only goodness grows deep roots, evil is superficial, disconnected — banal.

We reach the Catholic memorial; a cross, an altar and a metal gate to keep you out. I feel disappointed at these relics of religiosity, so empty of power or meaning. "So where is your God now?", Sally asks with disconcerting astuteness. I struggle with my thoughts as we walk on. Theodicy seems trite and shallow. Memories return of the misery of boarding school. "The only hope I could have," I reply after a pause, "is the belief that somewhere there is light at the end of the tunnel."

Yet, God is dead. The intervening, omnipotent ruler grew old, feeble and was murdered by the ugliest of men. He did not save us. What will replace God, asks Nietzsche, to save us now from nihilism? Meaningless suffering, without a cause is the blackest of all.

I recall Horkheimer's description of what remains: the human yearning for transcendence (Horkheimer, 1970), and think of Indra's net; each jewel reflecting every other and the whole of existence. Perhaps religion is a

yearning to reconnect to this infinite and beautiful Whole, beyond the limitation of our bounded, finite, fragile lives.

Connection means the reaching out to all other beings, by first becoming present to ourselves. It is the search for relationship with the Source of existence, the "Clear Light of the Void" the universal "I Am." Evil isolates and dehumanizes us through shame, fear, guilt and hatred. Only here, in the depths of our connectedness, can we confront these common enemies and find acceptance. Only here, in this embodied life can we embrace the estranged "Other."

All things must pass, including evil, degradation and suffering, but the I that is All — in all, goes on, forever unbounded.

The Jewish memorial stands like a black mound of skulls before us. Steps lead down into the dark interior, a hole in the ground: a grave. We descend into the cavern and stand in silence. Away from the daylight, it is difficult to see; the feeling is of being buried alive. Then Sally points; a line of lighter stone leads upwards to a shaft of sunlight streaming through a tiny hole above. A Hanukkah, the Judaic seven-branched symbol of light, and beyond that the open sky are visible, and in the darkness I hear the sound of birds singing outside.

It is time to go home.

Respectful Incomprehension

(by Frank-M. Staemmler)

As a German who was born a few years after World War II and who was raised in a family which had not been gripped by the "collective silence" (Heimannsberg & Schmidt, 1993), I have grown up with a permanent and increasing awareness of the atrocities perpetrated by Germans in the 1930s and '40s. The older I became and the more I realized what had happened on the battle fields and in the concentration camps, the stronger my emotional reactions to these events were when they became figural through the impact of films, books, or visits to the concentrations camp sites.

Of course the emotions I experienced were manifold: I have felt the horror that took my breath away and made me wish this might not be true, the overpowering compassion for those who suffered endlessly in the mercilessness of the death machinery, the helpless revulsion against the cruelty of the perpetrators and their total system, and many more. However, in the course of time one feeling became more and more salient: an all-embracing sadness about the immense suffering of millions of people.

At our visit to Dachau I went to the gas chamber and to the crematorium for the first time. (They are situated outside of the actual area of the campsite; at an earlier visit I had not been aware of them — a lapse, a denial?) As I was standing in the gas chamber I was overwhelmed by another wave of that deep sadness. Fortunately, at that moment no other visitors were present, and I felt free to give way to my tears and the deep sobbing that came up.

Although my crying was intense, there were also many thoughts going on in parallel, including reflections upon my ongoing experience: I realized that in spite of the intensity of my sadness, some *distance* remained between myself on the one hand, who was crying *about* (!) the tremendous suffering that had taken place in Dachau, and the ten thousands of people on the other hand, who had been tortured and killed. This distance did not appear to be only a matter of the sixty or seventy years that had gone by since those terrible events. It had more to do with the very fact that my sadness was 'about' them.

I started questioning myself: Was I avoiding to be fully touched by what had happened here? Too often, and mostly to the point, have I been taught that

> the 'inconceivable,' in this case as well as in subsequent instances of mass violence in the post-Holocaust period, is nothing more than a name for a reality that we are unprepared to accept, because it either offends our sense of order or threatens to unravel the curtain before which we ply our daily lives. (Langer, 1997, p. 52)

However, I did not want to resign to that possibility and decided to try and use one of our traditional 'technical' tools in Gestalt therapy, identification, i.e. to imagine myself being one of the prisoners in this camp. As I attempted to 'be' one of them, I became aware of an even stronger resistance. Although I had a sense of being emotionally open and although my tears were still flowing, there was something in me that felt like I did not want to identify with the prisoners' perspective. I tried several times, but to no avail.

It occurred to me that I was applying a hermeneutics of suspicion to my experience of that resistance. Maybe if I was applying the "principle of charity" (Davidson, 1984), I might be able to find out what my unwillingness to identify with the prisoners' perspective was all about. And then, all of a sudden, it struck me like lightning: What a grandiose presumptuousness of a person such as me, who never experienced anything that comes only close to the situation in a Nazi concentration camps, to even think I could be able to fully grasp what it was like to be imprisoned in a concentration camp and to be exposed to the daily harassment, degradation, abuse, torture, exploitation, and threat of being killed! If seen from this point of view, my 'resistance' against 'identifying' with the prisoners' perspective in order to understand their experience appeared both as an insurmountable incapacity and as a respectful act of tact that left the alterity of the prisoners and their situation as incomprehensible as it was — a regard for their otherness and a renunciation of an understanding that would appropriate and take possession of the uniqueness of their experience by 'assimilating' it (making it similar) to *my* frame of reference, which would be nothing else but another objectifying dehumanization.

I remembered the writings by one of the greatest moralists of our times, Emmanuel Lévinas, who eloquently emphasized that any ignorance or disrespect of the other's otherness must be seen as an inhumane act of violence or brutality. His German translator summed up his position when he wrote that the ". . . seizing — not the ethically responding — understanding of the other is violence towards him, since it just annihilates the otherness of the other and subjugates it . . ." (Wenzler in Lévinas, 1989, p. 71). For Lévinas, the other's *face* was the highly visible, awe-inspiring invoking of her or his human dignity, which he considered to be the more important "hypergood" (Taylor, 1992, pp. 62ff.) than knowing or comprehending the other.

Here, in the gas chamber of Dachau, through my respectful incomprehension of the prisoners, I had a sense of understanding Lévinas' claim better than ever before. Its relevance to psychotherapy, i.e. to the way in which we as therapists relate to our clients, is obvious: The importance of an empathic attitude (Staemmler, 2007) and a hermeneutic procedure (Staemmler 2006) needs to be preceded by an *ethical* response that prevents any form of possessive 'understanding' and 'assimilating' the other's experience to one' own.

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