"Memory and Hope,"
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on April 11, 2010

Because today is Yom Ha-Shoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, this week I re-read Elie Wiesel's book *Night*, his first-person account of his family's deportation to a German concentration camp when he was in his early teens. It's a small book, only 109 pages, but it is a riveting, powerful, difficult book to read, because the story it tells is so terrible.

It is not a hopeful book. And how could it be? It tells the story of a young and faithful boy who wanted, at an early age, to study the Jewish mystics, but whose life, and the life of every Jew in his village in Romania, was forever changed on the day when the Nazis came. It's an account of suffering and loss that is hard to even read about. By the time Elie and his family arrived at the concentration camp, their worst fears, fears that months before could have only been found in nightmares, were coming true.

"Never shall I forget that night," he writes, "the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreathes of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God himself. Never." "[1]

I grew up hearing about the Holocaust. In school we talked about the war, and concentration camps, and Anne Frank. We memorized dates and figures--6 million Jews killed, up to 5 million others. We even learned about some of the awful and inhuman things the Nazis did to their prisoners. But I didn't really understand about the Holocaust until one night when I was in college. I was taking an American history class, and studying World War II we watched the movie *Judgment at Nuremberg*, a feature film about the Nazi war crimes trials. That film includes newsreel footage shot by the Allies when they liberated concentration camps. This black and white film shows gaunt people in striped uniforms behind barbed wire. And it shows Allied bulldozers pushing piles of bodies into mass graves. The moment I saw those pictures, I thought, "O my God. It really happened. They really killed all those people." In that moment I realized that, though I knew the facts about the holocaust, the reality of it, that it really happened, had never sunk in, until I saw those images.

Margaret Bourke-White, the famous *Life* magazine photographer, had a similar experience. After taking pictures at Buchenwald, she wrote to her editor, "The sights I

[1] Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam, 1982), p. 32

have just seen are so unbelievable that I don't think I will believe them myself until I've seen the photographs." General Dwight D. Eisenhower told his staff he wanted every American unit not actually in the front lines to see the concentration camps. He knew it was something so terrible as to not be believed, and he understood how important it would be to future generations that there be people 'in a position to give first-hand evidence of these things,"[2] because he knew that over time there would be pressure to forget, and even to deny, the Holocaust.

There's something in human nature that doesn't want to believe that we are capable of acts so evil. And that is why it's so important that we remember. That we talk a long hard look at those things it would be easy to turn away from.

Friday night, people gathered at Temple Emmanu-El to remember the victims of the Holocaust. I couldn't be there this year, and I'm grateful to those of you who went. It means a lot to show up and to stand in solidarity with our friends from other faith traditions and remember what we stand for.

At our clergy group meeting this past Wednesday, I asked Rabbi Ira Korinow about the flyer he had sent out, which said at the top, "It is our responsibility to sanctify the memory of the six million." I asked him about that word 'sanctify.' Sanctify is a religious word, it means to set apart for holy use. The Rabbi said that in Jewish theology, anyone who is killed for no reason other than they are Jewish, or gay, or of some ethnic group, their death is sanctified, understood as a tribute to God. This theology was articulated over a thousand years ago, when during the crusades Jews were forced to choose between conversion to Christianity and death. Those martyrs were understood to have died giving glory to God, sanctifying God's holy name.

When we who are living gather to remember those were killed, we consecrate their memory. Our remembering is a holy act. It's like what we did in prayers last week, when I invited you speak the names of those you wanted to pray for. It didn't matter if everyone heard the names you spoke--what mattered was that you spoke them, that you offered them up.

Elie Wiesel said, "I decided to devote my life to telling the story because I felt that having survived I owe something to the dead. And anyone who does not remember betrays them again." It is our responsibility to remember. By remembering, we vow to do our own part, to say that never again will this kind of genocide be allowed to happen. I hope you will be able to come here on Tuesday night to hear Dr. Lisette Kaplowitz tell the story of on Holocaust survivor, and be part of that remembering.

I understand that this isn't easy. Sometimes I fear that if I spend too much time in the shadows, it will be overwhelming and I'll never come into the light again. But the truth

[2] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website; www.ushmm.org/remembrance/dor/years/detail.php?content=2010&lang=

is, the things we fear can actually get bigger, and have more power over us, when we avoid or deny them, when we push them into the shadows, when we lock parts of ourselves away. We live in a culture that tells us to push away what psychologist Miriam Greenspan calls our "dark emotions," our grief, our fear, our despair. But Greenspan says the way we find healing is by facing and feeling those emotions, by passing through them rather than running away from them. She says these dark emotions can become a source of wisdom if we will learn to befriend them.[3]

Elie Wiesel says life didn't get easier after being liberated from the concentration camp. He says "real despair only seized us later. Afterwards. As we emerged from the nightmare and began to search for meaning... " He and other survivors asked, "Why go on? If memory continually brought us back to this, why build a home? Why bring children into a world in which God and man betrayed their trust in one another?"

He continues, "Of course we could try to forget the past. Why not? Is it not natural for a human being to repress what causes him pain, what causes him shame? ...But for the first time in history, we could not bury our dead. We bear their graves within ourselves. For us, forgetting was never an option. Remembering is a noble and necessary act."[4]

At the start I said that Elie Wiesel's account of his teenage years in a concentration camp is not a hopeful book. But our reading this morning,[5] from his essay of a few years ago, is all about hope. What happened? I'd say Elie Wiesel found his way to back to hope only by walking straight into his dark night of the soul, by committing his life to remembering what happened and by telling those stories, by looking deeply and honestly and courageously at the terrible things he experienced. Like Job, he had the courage even to argue with God, to ask, "Where were you in all this? How could you let this happen? Why did you abandon us?"

Hope is not the same things as optimism. Cornel West, quoting Vaclav Havel, says "'Optimism' is the belief that things are going to turn out as you would like, as opposed to 'hope,' which is when you are thoroughly convinced something is moral and right and just and therefore you fight regardless of the consequences. In that sense," West says, "I'm full of hope but in no way optimistic."

Not long ago an interviewer asked Elie Wiesel what happened after he lost his faith forever at Auschwitz. He answered: "What happened afterwards is in the book. I went on praying."[6]

---

[3] Miriam Greenspan, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions* (Boston: Shambala, 2004).
[4] Elie Wiesel, from his Nobel Peace Prize lecture in 1986, available at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-lecture.html
[5] The reading was from "The America I Love," Parade Magazine, July 4, 2004, available at http://www.parade.com/articles/editions/2004/edition_07-04-2004/featured_0
[6] This conversation found at http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/wiesel/transcript.shtml

Sometimes I wonder how much my own theology--my view of a loving God--depends on the fact that I've been fortunate in this life. Would I be as faithful and as steadfast as Elie Wiesel has been, had I had suffered more? And by faithful I don't mean blind faith or obedience. I mean living an openhearted life even when your heart's been broken, going back out into the world even when you have every reason to pull the covers over your head and withdraw. I know it's not something I can do all on my own. I hope and pray that this church will help me and will help you to live a life of courage and commitment. That's why we're here. So that like Elie Wiesel, we will keep on praying, with our lips and in our lives.

If so, we probably wont be an optimistic people, we won't suffer the delusion that things are going to work out the way we want; but we will be a hopeful people, who know that the arc of the moral universe does bend towards justice and we are part of that bending.

In spite of everything, Elie Wiesel went on praying. So will you join me now in prayer? This is Elie Wiesel's prayer:[7]

"I no longer ask you for either happiness or paradise; all I ask of You is to listen and let me be aware of Your listening.

I no longer ask You to resolve my questions, only to receive them and make them part of You.

I no longer ask You for either rest or wisdom, I only ask You not to close me to gratitude, be it of the most trivial kind, or to surprise and friendship. Love? Love is not Yours to give.

As for my enemies, I do not ask You to punish them or even to enlighten them; I only ask You not to lend them Your mask and Your powers. If You must relinquish one or the other, give them Your powers. But not Your countenance.

They are modest, my requests, and humble. I ask You what I might ask a stranger met by chance at twilight in a barren land.

I ask you, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to enable me to pronounce these words without betraying the child that transmitted them to me: God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, enable me to forgive You and enable the child I once was to forgive me too.

I no longer ask You for the life of that child, nor even for his faith. I only beg You to listen to him and act in such a way that You and I can listen to him together."

Amen.

---

[7] This prayer was published in Wiesel's book *One Generation After.*