

## THE SUNFLOWER: CONFESSION, SILENCE, AND FORGIVENESS

I first happened upon Simon Wiesenthal's THE SUNFLOWER about twelve years ago, as I was browsing in the public library where I live, in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York. It struck me then as one of the most remarkable books I had ever read. It still does. In the last few years I have optioned the rights of the work to develop it into a documentary movie as well as a feature film...so I've been quite thoroughly involved with it, on a number of levels.

### *About the Book*

*The Sunflower* is a harrowing personal recollection by Wiesenthal as well as one of the most thought-provoking books about the subject of forgiveness and justice ever written. It's also a compelling work about silence and suffering. In France it was named the 1969 Book of the Year and generated weeks of headline stories. Wiesenthal himself considered it to be his best written work. Since its publication it's been assigned reading in countless ethics, history, and religion courses around the world

## **Four Stories**

The book tells four basic stories.

First and foremost, it tells the story of Wiesenthal's encounter with a dying Nazi soldier, Karl, when Simon himself was an inmate in a concentration camp. In addition, it relates three other stories: the story of Karl's own participation in an atrocity; the story of Simon's visit to Karl's mother years after his meeting with Karl; and the story of Simon's dialogues with friends and many others about the fateful meeting between Karl and himself.

The year was 1942. Wiesenthal was 33 years old. His mother, many other close relatives, and all of his townspeople had already been annihilated or been herded and transported to this end. He's been living in the most brutal conditions in the camp where he's imprisoned, with death by the sadistic whim of the guards as a constant threat and a slower death by starvation a virtual certainty.

One day, Wiesenthal's doing garbage duty outside a makeshift German army hospital in Lemberg, Poland, housed coincidentally in the high school he had attended years before. A Red Cross nurse approaches. She asks him, "Are you a Jew?" She leads him inside to the infirmary and brings him to the bedside of a heavily bandaged, fatally wounded S.S. soldier. His name is Karl. This man will die a few hours after his talk with Simon, at the age of twenty-one.

## **Karl's Story**

Soon Karl's explaining why Simon's been summoned. He says, "I must tell you something dreadful, something inhuman...I must tell you of this horrible deed because you are a Jew." He begins by recounting his early background, describing his passionate involvement with the Catholic Church as a child. He goes on to recall how he joined Hitler Youth and then the S.S., and how his father was appalled by these voluntary affiliations. His father's reaction was to reject him. (He may also have been afraid that if he said a word, his son would report him.)

Before long Karl comes around to the incident he has felt such a desperate need of confessing. About a year and a half before Karl's meeting with Simon, his platoon arrived in a small Jewish town in Russia. His officers gave the order for all the inhabitants of the town, three hundred to four hundred men, women and children, to be herded together and crammed into one house. He and his fellow soldiers obeyed. The officers then ordered them to haul cans of gasoline into the house with these innocent civilians, and to throw grenades into the house. He and the others followed these orders, too. Finally the officers told their subordinates to shoot anyone trying to escape. The soldiers, including Karl, complied again.

Karl relates this incident in throes of agonized self-revulsion, and he reaches out and holds Simon's hand. Simon and later commentators have raised the question of how much less shattered and tortured Karl would have been if he were not in physical pain and about to die. Karl was haunted most by the image of a father, mother and child who leapt in flames from a window.

Concluding his reminiscence, Karl tells Simon, “I am left here with my guilt. In the last hours of my life you are with me. I do not know who you are. I only know that you are a Jew and that is enough....I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him....I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace.”

Simon felt completely helpless in the face of this profound request. There was a long silence. Finally Simon stood up and left the room without uttering a word.

### **Simon’s Questions**

Did Simon do the right thing? Did he have anything he should reproach himself for? What should he have done? He begins to obsess over these unsettling questions. First he brings them to his two close friends in the camp, Arthur and Josek. They discuss the poignant incident at some length.

Two years later, when these two friends and nearly everyone Simon has known in the camp have died, he makes a new friend. Bolek, a Catholic Pole who has studied for the priesthood, is a new arrival at another camp where Simon has been transferred. Simon soon puts his questions about the encounter to him. All of them distill into one: “What would you have done in my place?” These dialogues and the responses of his friends shed significant light on the very meaning of forgiveness – its depths, its complexities, and its limits.

### **A Visit to Karl's Mother**

Simon is finally freed from the camp. In 1946, four years after his meeting with young Karl, he decides to pay a visit to Karl's mother. She's a broken woman, a widow living in the decrepit rubble of her former home. She speaks at length about her "good boy". Simon listens. He chooses to keep silent regarding her son's complicity in mass murder.

As Simon describes the beginning of his meeting with Karl's mother, he makes one of the most wrenchingly conscience-rousing comments in his book. "I looked at the old lady who was clearly kindhearted, a good mother and a good wife. Without doubt she must often have shown sympathy for the oppressed, but the happiness of her own family was of paramount importance to her. There were millions of such families anxious only for peace and quiet in their own little nests. These were the mounting blocks by which the criminals climbed to power and kept it." These quiet words call into question the wish for comfort that is a strong drive in every human being. They represent a stinging challenge to the compromises most of us make in some way or another, to keep our own little nests feeling safe and secure.

Karl's mother confirms what Karl had told Simon before his death: that his father had kept absolutely silent when Karl went to war. He refused to say a single word to his son.

### **Simon's Questions and Dialogues Persist**

Simon has approached a number of distinguished men and women on two occasions, for the first and second editions of the book, in the late 1960's and the late 1990's. He has done his best to make each of them as well as all of us participants in his encounter with Karl, by asking each one, "What would you have done?" His own work of questioning has been greatly enriched by the thoughtful responses of Desmond Tutu, Mary Gordon, Harry Wu, the Dalai Lama, Robert Coles, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Susannah Heschel, Harold Kushner, and Cynthia Ozick, as well as many other Holocaust survivors, theologians, human rights activists, and near victims of attempted genocide in Bosnia, South Africa, Cambodia, China, and Tibet. At the same time, most of these responses have been variants on the original responses Simon heard from his three friends in the concentration camps.

Several respondents describe their own personal encounters with inhumanity and inconceivable cruelty, in the Holocaust and later collective sieges of brutality. Other respondents refer to heroic figures of forgiveness, including Nelson Mandela, the Nicaraguan Tomas Borge, and Jesus. The Dalai Lama describes the extraordinary graciousness of an anonymous Tibetan monk imprisoned for sixteen years toward his Chinese captors.

One of the recurring critiques of Karl's position is that he did not address Simon as a real individual, but rather as "a Jew". An interchangeable entity with zero value as a person in his own right. Thus in some sense he perpetuated the Nazi stance. Similarly,

many of Simon's respondents discuss Karl less as a person and more as simply "one of the Nazi murderers." Some readers may find such a dehumanizing categorization appropriate in Karl's case but not for Simon. Or is it? This is just one of the crucial questions Simon's own recollection and unremitting inquiry has re-animated for all of us.

### **The Sunflower**

When linked to Simon's earlier and later life, *The Sunflower* asks, "Can we forgive a murderer if we truly honor the memory of his victims?" Also, "Can we forgive a murderer if we are truly committed to rooting out the blood-thirsty thugs in this world?" (If we fully intend to make the world safer against murderers to come?)

How do the competing claims of justice and forgiveness fit together? Do they meet somewhere in the middle? For the Jewish mystic and spiritual seekers in other traditions, that middle where they meet is the divine mystery.

Needless to say, Wiesenthal is a patriarchal figure of almost biblical proportions. (Less well known is that his complexity includes a mystical Jewish streak; among signs of this fact was his recognition of strange synchronicities in his own life.) In his passion for the rule of law and in other interesting ways, Wiesenthal is a modern-day Moses. The encounter between Karl and Simon harks back to the story of Cain and Abel. The hour of utter helplessness when Simon meets Karl is like the night when Jacob wrestles with the

angel: it is one of the searing times in his life when the strength of the man joined with a radical vulnerability.

Simon continued to wrestle with the angel of that hour for a long time to come, and through this book, he invites us into the excruciating heart of the struggle.

### **Conclusion**

Simon's story connects at a remarkable level of intimacy with the fate of the six million Jews and the millions of non-Jewish innocent victims of the Holocaust. It speaks out as well for the millions of others who have been massacred by the vicious monsters who have haunted humanity through the ages but never more so than in the last hundred years.

A wealthy jewelry manufacturer who had been imprisoned in a concentration camp once asked Simon why he has devoted his life to hunting Nazis: "Simon, if you had gone back to building houses, you'd be a millionaire. Why didn't you?" Simon replied that "when we come to the other world and meet the millions of Jews who died in the camps and they ask us, 'What have you done?', there will be many answers. (In other words, how have you used the precious time that you were granted, that had been robbed from us?) You will say, "I became a jeweler." Another will say, 'I have smuggled coffee and American cigarettes'. Another will say, 'I built houses'. But I will say, 'I didn't forget you.'"

The book *The Sunflower* takes its name from a recurring image in Simon's recollections. It first appears in the book when Simon and the other inmates are passing a



military cemetery in Lemberg. A sunflower is planted on each grave. The bright yellow flower heads draw the sunlight down into the darkness where each soldier is buried. Simon thinks that these dead men are receiving sunlight through the flowers. He also imagines that they are hearing messages whispered by butterflies fluttering from flower to flower. The sunflowers connect them to the world of the living.

Suddenly Simon is seized with envy: “For me there would be no sunflower. I would be buried in a mass grave, where corpses would be buried on top of me. No sunflower would ever bring light into my darkness, and no butterflies would dance upon my dreadful tomb.”

Simon survived the camps. His book itself is a sunflower, drawing light into the darkness of senseless human suffering.

#### COMMENTARY

In the Jewish tradition, we find the beautiful idea of “midrash”, commentary, referring originally to ongoing interpretations of scripture. In its own particular way, I believe that THE SUNFLOWER is a holy book, beckoning each reader to a process of serious thinking and wholehearted soul-searching and dialogue with others. In any case, the book is an invitation to ponder and discuss crucial matters of the human psyche and the religious life. I shall continue my own attempt at a beginning commentary now, with respect to three psychological and religious realities: confession, silence, and forgiveness.

First, CONFESSION. Young Karl tries to confess to Simon, a representative Jew. What does he confess? His pain. His shame. His fear. His horror at what he has become. One can well imagine a scene, or repeated scenes, a few years before the encounter between Karl and Simon, when Karl is a Hitler youth, tormenting his young Jewish peers with accusations of “Judas” and “Christ killer.” On some fundamental level, Karl in his dying days and hours now faces the horrifying recognition that he himself is Judas. He himself has killed Christ.

Much of what we do as therapists is listen to the confessions of patients. Confessions of pain. Confessions of shame and fear. Confessions of self-revulsion. How different is the listening role of the therapist and the priest? How different was Simon’s listening to Karl?

The topic of confession is almost unfathomably deep, is it not? In Western mythos, the first words out of Adam’s mouth after he has become mortal are a confession, in response to God’s question, “Where are you?” Adam responds, “I hid, because I was afraid.” To what extent can all human confession be seen as a reverberation of Adam’s own words, borne out of fear and shame? Is Karl’s set of recollections in some sense an echo of Adam’s first confession? In other words, near the core of every human soul, is there perhaps a profound shell of existential fear and shame?

The power of listening to someone’s pain lies at the heart of what we do as therapists. In Simon’s case, even though he offered only silence, no words of forgiveness, perhaps his listening itself was an answer that freed Karl to let go and die. In any case, Karl did indeed die later that same day. And of note, when he first began

speaking to Simon, he spoke not of a need for an answer, but of a need to speak, a need to confess. I am reminded of the compelling movies THE ENGLISH PATIENT and TITANIC. In each, a person tells his or her painful story, some amalgam of memory and confession, and is listened to carefully, and is thereby freed to die a peaceful death.

Now let's touch upon SILENCE.

This book of four stories deals also with four silences:

First and most centrally, the silence of Simon with Karl, ending their encounter

Second, the earlier silence of Karl's father with Karl

(Simon's silence in some transference sense repeats the father's silence. Is this some real life variant of Freud's repetition compulsion?)

Third, the later silence of Simon with Karl's mother: arguably a silence of mercy

Fourth, the recurring silence of God in the face of mass human slaughter and suffering

Is it too much to say that *The Sunflower* may have begun the work of redeeming these silences? Are these silences amenable to redemption? Needless to say, the fourth silence, the silence of God, has meaning only to a believer. The possibility that it, too, may have a need of redemption makes sense only to a believer, or to a certain subset of uncertain believers...among whom I count myself.

Someone longs for a sense of connection and is greeted with silence. Someone tells his painful story, and the response is "nothing but" silent listening. We are on familiar territory, are we not? One of the great challenges of self-discipline for the

therapist is learning the art of leaving people, the confessors, the sufferers, truly to themselves. Sometimes this leaving someone to himself means leaving him to struggle with great pain almost entirely on his own. We're in the ballpark of analytic neutrality here, with all its implications, all its strengths and potential pitfalls.

The difference between Simon's silence and analytic silence is worth considering. Simon's silence is the silence of suffering and confusion and bewilderment and anger. Analytic silence is usually posed in grander healing terms. But perhaps it would be right and wise for us to see it more in terms of suffering and confusion and bewilderment and anger. Is the therapist above the fray, truly beyond the patient's turmoil? If so, he or she is perhaps of little use. Or is the therapist under the same wheels of suffering? Ideally, the therapist alternates between these two positions and keeps knocking on the door of the human and helpful middle ground between them, and having the door opened, and entering.

Finally, FORGIVENESS:

Forgiveness and justice are both very great things. How are we to resolve the tension between the two? This is a central question THE SUNFLOWER poses to each of us. Its implications reach deeply into many of the situations of our own lives.

However great both forgiveness and justice are, to engage the basic question of forgiveness earnestly, both within oneself and in dialogue with others, is also a very great

thing. This is the beauty and the pioneering genius of Simon's book. Allow me continue to take up its challenge a little more now.

In Judaism, it is said that God's mercy and God's rigor are perfectly integrated, so much so that His mercy is rigor, and His rigor is mercy.

In the Talmud, it is said that "These and those are *both* the words of the living God." Heaven decrees that the school of Shammai with its emphasis on rigor and the school of Hillel with its stress on mercy are BOTH perfectly correct. This is a key point. Nonetheless, the heavenly voice that starts by calling it a draw, as it were, goes on to rule in favor of Hillel, because his is a way of mercy.

Okay then, so Kernberg and Kohut are BOTH right, and yet, at the end of the day, if we had to choose between the two...or if we left Heaven to decide between them... Or if we knocked on Heaven's door...or if we turned the key in the lock on Heaven's door, what we would find?

Okay then, in the course of my day, if someone insults me, it is fair and right for me to be angry, and to let this person know it, in a civilized way. Yet it is also JUST FINE for me to take a step back, to connect with a sense of compassion for this person's own struggle, and to be kind in response. Both are good; the second ultimately is favored and worthy of reaching for.

Needless to say, when the violence this other has done me goes way, way, way beyond a simple insult, and enters into the realm of murder, or even beyond murder into massacre and genocide, things have gotten much more tragic and complicated. But perhaps the same basic principles might apply, with the added dimension of the need for

physical self-protection (For the Christian who follows in Christ's footsteps, this last caveat may not apply.)

The specific debate which prompted the heavenly response in the Talmud concerned the question of whether human beings in all their misery and imperfection should ever have been created. Along these lines, Josek, Simon's concentration camp friend, tells the Jewish tale that when the human being was created, four angels stood as Godparents: the angels of Truth, Peace, Mercy and Justice. They argued for a long time with God and among themselves about whether God should create humans at all. The one who opposed the idea most was the angel of truth and in anger God sent him into banishment on earth. The other angels pleaded with God to show mercy and allow him back into heaven. God relented and recalled the angel. The angel brought back with him a clod of earth, which was soaked in his tears, tears he had shed through being banished from heaven. It was from this clod that God created man.

Another inmate friend of Simon's, Arthur, responded, "I am ready to believe that God created a Jew out of the tear soaked clod of earth, but can you really tell me that he also made the camp commandant out of the same material?" My friend and Zen teacher Albert Low, in his own *midrash* on *The Sunflower*, goes on to ask, Did Hitler and his gang magnify the violence and malevolence that lurks in us all, or were they a special breed, some human mutation from the realm of evil? When the evil someone has done me goes beyond the realm of a simple insult and has become genocide, is it a completely different ballgame? How we think about the problem of evil, however vaguely and implicitly, links directly with how we think and act in relation to forgiveness.

What is forgiveness? What is evil? Most of us aim to some degree at being forgiving, some of us more seriously and naturally than others. In psychotherapy, we also encourage our patients to be more simply honest with themselves...more honestly angry, for example. Forgiveness without the rigor of self-honesty tends to be a brittle ideal, a glossing over. My first spiritual teacher Rudi called this kind of thing the sprinkle of sugar on a mountain of manure.

Self-honesty provides the grist for the process of learning forgiveness. And forgiveness is more of a process, a long and winding road, than it is a static place. If it is static or rote, by the book, how alive and real is it, after all?

Albert Low reminds us of a related dimension of rigor by referring to the Buddhist Sutra of *Vimalakirti*, which includes a collection of dialogues between Buddha's close monastic disciples and Vimalakirti. Vimalakirti was a highly developed layman and in spiritual discussions always seemed to get the better even of the most advanced of the monks. One dialogue concerned a monk named Upali. Upali says that on one occasion two monks told him they had committed a sin but were too ashamed to confess this to Buddha. They asked Upali to absolve them of their sins. Upali said he was talking to them about this when Vimalakirti came to say, "Do not aggravate further the sins of these two monks by absolving them." In other words, let them stew in their own juices, and let them stew like that truly for their own good. Compassion often means leaving someone alone. I'm reminded again of analytic neutrality, and of Freud's view of exploratory therapy as gold in comparison with the inferior copper of supportive therapy.

## FINAL THOUGHTS:

Do you recall Adam's first words of shame and fear? "I hid, because I was afraid." What does it take for any human being to come out of hiding?

Hiding is a deep theme implied by *The Sunflower*, especially as we consider it in relation to the sweep of Simon's life: the hiding of the innocent (like Moses in the bulrushes) and the hiding of the guilty. Simon's first hunted by the Nazis and hides from them, one of the countless Moses-like or Anne Frank-like bits of innocent goodness targeted by deadly evil. After the war, the roles are reversed. Simon plucks the Nazis themselves from out of hiding. Through efforts like Simon's, goodness is then engaged in a hide-and-seek game with evil, with justice in mind, not vengeance, as Simon has insisted. And when one reads Albert Speer's selection in the last half of *The Sunflower*, one senses that there has perhaps been an element of mercy in Simon's Nazi hunting, whether intended or not. Perhaps it could be said that this is not Simon's own mercy, but God's. Or some factor of mercy in the universe as a whole, with Simon embodying it to some degree.

In any case, during the last half century of Simon's life, he's haunted by ghosts: the ghosts of all those who perished in the Holocaust, the ghosts of the elusive living Nazis in our midst, and the ghost of the Nazi Karl. Karl, now long dead: but for Simon, always still dying...and confessing, yearning for peace, reaching toward Simon, imploring him for the impossible.

During the last half of Simon's life, this iconic Jew, detective, and seeker had two compelling obsessions: tracking down hidden Nazis, and tracking down the hidden



meaning contained in his unusual meeting with Karl. (The Nazi Karl had come out of hiding, as it were, in seeking a human connection with Simon, and Simon later seeks the reality of meeting with the Nazis he seeks and finds and brings to justice.) In some sense, both Simon's pursuit of Nazis and his search for the meaning of his encounter with Karl are a single quest for truth, meaning, and redemption.

Let me ask again, what does it take for any human being to come out of hiding? How do we turn and face the silence without being overwhelmed by it? How do we turn and face the fear and shame within ourselves without being overwhelmed by them?

In Buber's commentary about Adam's hiding, he says that each of us is Adam, repeating a teaching by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hasidic master the Tanya, the original Lubavitcher rebbe. Each of us hides in fear and shame from God and therefore from ourselves. It could also be said that we hide from ourselves and therefore from God.

Simon's story implies yet another silence, a fifth one: the silence of the bystanders who said nothing as they watched victims being led to the slaughterhouses of Europe. And what of our own silence? How fully are each of us protesting and fighting the good fight against the enormity of violence and injustice and exploitation in this world? I'd like to repeat Simon's words about Karl's mother:

"I looked at the old lady who was clearly kindhearted, a good mother and a good wife. Without doubt she must often have shown sympathy for the oppressed, but the happiness of her own family was of paramount importance to her. There were millions of such families anxious only for peace and quiet in their own little nests. These were the mounting blocks by which the criminals climbed to power and kept it."

How do human beings come out of hiding? They can be wrenched out, but for our souls to come out of hiding willingly, our whole selves and not just our surface selves, we need to hear the question God posed to Adam, “Where are you?” and to face the true challenge of that question. Echoing the Tanya, Buber taught that God asks this question of each one of us repeatedly. He also taught that all depends on whether we turn and face the question.

For me, the inspiring beauty of Simon Wiesenthal’s book *The Sunflower* is that it embodies this central question to the soul. It offers one way of asking, “Where are you?” to each of us. In this way, it joins with the endeavor of psychotherapy. Both Simon’s book and our efforts as healers are expressions of the great human work of soul-searching.