

MARK SANDO MININBERG

"There's Your Monastery"

The Case

At Auschwitz, I found myself standing atop a ruined and half-buried gas chamber, singing Jewish prayers, led by a rabbi, with a small group of Roshi Bernie's retreat participants from around the world. They included the descendants of camp survivors and of Nazi camp guards. As we sang, the Earth began to tremble. The rabbi bent low and touched the soil covering the ruin, urging us to continue singing prayers: "*Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai, Eloheinu ...*" Suddenly, a powerful wave of spiritual energy seemed to rise out of the ground and through each person, opening all in a spontaneous revelation. Some fell to the ground, others looked to the sky. Someone said: "My God, my body reaches everywhere!" In that moment, we cried at once tears of joy and tears of suffering. Later, when I reported the event to Roshi Bernie, he just smiled and said: "There's your monastery."

Commentary

I met Roshi Bernie Glassman after nearly two decades of koan study with his dharma brother Daido Roshi at Zen Mountain Monastery. Despite Daidoshi's great patience and loving efforts, I had become stuck in my

practice. Bernie, seeing this, immediately said: "Why don't you come to Auschwitz with us next week?" I had no idea what visiting the infamous former death camp had to do with studying the dharma, but I trusted Roshi Bernie's invitation to take a plunge into the unknown.

Getting stuck can be caused by imagining that our practice will help us escape from life's difficulties. We believe that if we can advance ourselves far enough along the path, if we can have a transcendent spiritual experience, we can avoid pain or grief or harboring ill feelings toward others. And yet if we are really practicing, there is no escape from facing our demons. As Roshi Bernie once said, "Our tendency in life is to avoid things that frighten us. But in order to become whole, we need to go deeper and deeper into ourselves by reaching farther and farther into the things we fear."

Roshi, who had studied and taught for many years in a formal temple environment, later radically changed his upaya, his approach to training, taking his students outside to the streets and to other places that would challenge their fixed notions of self. One of those places was Auschwitz.

The first formal teaching we received from Bernie when arriving at the camp was a recitation of the Three Tenets: Not-Knowing, Bearing Witness, and Loving Action.

A few days later a group of strangers from widely differing backgrounds and religious faiths shared the revelation at the ruined gas chamber. What happened?

Why did it happen? No one can say. We must look to our own direct experience of reality. This is Not-Knowing, the first tenet.

Abiding in not-knowing, we bear witness as all phenomena—suffering and joy, loss and redemption, ordinary life and miraculous revelation—arise and pass away and are revealed as nothing but our self. This is Bearing Witness, the second tenet.

When we give up fixed ideas of self and enter not-knowing, when we bear witness to the world and see others as ourselves, we are moved to spontaneous acts of kindness and generosity and forgiveness. This is Loving Action, the third tenet.

Roshi Bernie made a vow to help others realize the oneness of life and to serve those suffering in a world based on the illusion of separation. He left behind his formal priestly robes and took to the streets to feed the hungry and serve the destitute. Roshi taught us that “when we bear witness, when we become the situation—homelessness, poverty, illness, violence, death—the right action arises by itself.... Once we listen with our entire body and mind, loving action arises.”

Study in a cloister, practice on the street, feeding the hungry and serving the poor, bearing witness to good and evil, we are living a miraculous and luminous reality. It is so close that there is no place we can stand apart to grasp it. The only way to realize it is to take a plunge into the unknown. Wherever you go, there's your monastery.

Verse

*Realizing the oneness of life,
We enter not-knowing.
We bear witness to the joy and suffering of the world.
We offer loving action to all beings beyond space
and time.*