

When Victim Meets Perpetrator: The Question of Atonement and Forgiveness: Buddhist and Christian Reflections ¹

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In a highly gripping and thought-provoking work titled *The Sunflower*, Simon Wiesenthal, well-known for his pursuit and identification of Nazi war criminals leading to their prosecution after the Second World War, relates a first-person story as a prisoner in a concentration camp who encounters a young German soldier in the throes of death.² In those last crucial moments of his life, the soldier seeks him out, a Jew, to ask for his forgiveness for the atrocities committed against the Jewish people by the Nazi regime, of which the soldier himself was a willing participant. Wiesenthal invites his readers to put ourselves in his place, as the Jew whom the Nazi soldier approaches to ask for forgiveness, and throws this question straight at us. “What would *you* do?”

The latter section of the book includes the transcripts of a symposium, with theologians, philosophers, religious leaders, journalists, and others offering their own responses to Wiesenthal’s question. A second edition of the book, published some twenty years after the first American edition (1976), adds thirty-two responses from other prominent individuals who are sent the manuscript to read and asked to respond to the same question. To forgive, or not to forgive: that is the question. Simon Wiesenthal’s own response, as he describes in his narrative, was one of numbed silence. He relates how this response tugged at his conscience, drawing him to seek out and visit the mother of the deceased German soldier after the war and continuing on in a process of self-reflection many years thereafter.

Each of the essays in *The Sunflower* offers an earnest and well-considered response that issues forth from the respondent’s fundamental stance about life. As is evident, by no means do these responses settle the issue once and for all, one way or the other, so we can move on to the next question, as it were. We are cautioned by many of them to be fully cognizant of the complexity of the matter at hand, thus making us less prone to making simplistic statements of outright forgiveness or of plain refusal to do so.

Included among these is a short piece by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. His message is, “Forgive, but do not forget.” In reading his statement initially, I must confess a doubt that arose. Is he not falling into a simplistic mindset here? In his advice to forgive, he seemed to be brushing aside the enormity of the calamity that befell the Jewish people, and by extension, all those who have been subjected to acts of genocide and senseless violence throughout human history, calling for restitution as a cry to the heavens. Indeed, most of the other respondents, whose statements are recorded in the book, emphasize that cheap “forgiveness” cannot and will not do justice to the enormity and complexity of all that is involved, in our individual lives, in our collective lives, in our history, in our incipient future.

For a victim of betrayal, of molestation or rape, of grand theft, or of physical or some other form of unimaginable violence to one’s person or to one’s loved ones that can make anyone shudder, “forgiveness” is the last thought to come to mind. One may need time, perhaps a whole lifetime, to come to terms with what one may have suffered through. It may take a long, arduous therapeutic process seeking healing, getting one’s life back on track, if at all.

We can never and must never forget. Indeed, as long as we are the human beings conditioned as we are in our finitude and embedded in our karmic history and in our current

dysfunctional global state of affairs, we cannot afford to forget the sufferings, especially of those who died and those who continue to live under the threat of death through violence by our fellow humans beings, lest we keep repeating the same mistakes. And yet we do forget, and we do repeat those mistakes, over and over and over. Our contemporary global scene attests to this forgetfulness.

Turning back to the Dalai Lama, with his advice to “forgive, but do not forget,” he recalls a Tibetan monk who was imprisoned for eighteen years by Chinese authorities who came to see him after he was released. Asked what he felt was the biggest threat or danger he felt while in prison, the monk’s response (to the surprise of the Dalai Lama himself) was that his greatest fear was “losing his compassion for the Chinese.”

The monk’s response comes from a state of mind that far exceeds ordinary human expectations of anyone put in the situation of intense pain and suffering through long years of imprisonment and deprivation. In ways different from the monk’s case, the Dalai Lama himself has been the subject of ongoing persecution and harassment by the Chinese authorities since his exile from Tibet in 1959, but he has always maintained a stance of loving-kindness and compassion for his persecutors. For this he has often been criticized, including by those within in his own Tibetan community, and by many others who support the cause for Tibetan independence, for “going too easy” on the Chinese.

Against the impending and very real threat Tibetans perceive of having their entire culture, their centuries of tradition, their very people, wiped out from this earth by the bulldozing effects of Chinese aggressive policies vis-à-vis Tibet, many of the Dalai Lama’s followers have lost their patience with him and his path of non-violent resistance and are considering other ways to counter the aggressor’s threat. Chinese authorities consider the Dalai Lama *persona non grata* and continue to exert pressure on other governments and public entities to have him barred from official functions in or visits to their countries and locations. And yet the Dalai Lama continues to turn the other cheek. This stance is, in the eyes of many, simply beyond human comprehension.

Perhaps it is precisely because he refuses to take up arms (or to encourage others to do so) against his and his people’s oppressors that these oppressors find him all the more dangerous a threat, a subversive element of a powerful moral force challenging their official stance, their acts, and their policies. The Dalai Lama exposes Chinese practices and attitudes towards his people to the scrutiny of the entire world. Armed rebellion is countered and quashed by corresponding military force, and there is no doubt the Chinese can and will do that in such a case. A non-violent form of resistance like the Dalai Lama’s and his followers’ continues to cry out loud and clear throughout the world, for all people of good will to hear, thereby challenging and calling those people to take a stand.

In our times, the transformative power of such forms of resistance is attested to by figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and so many others who have not found their names in the headlines. They remain a truly efficacious source of vision and inspiration that can motivate us to dedicate ourselves for the long haul to the tedious and burdensome yet exhilarating work of liberation from oppression of all sorts. The oppressive elements can be found in the externally observable and analyzable human-made structures that comprise the political, social, economic, ecological, and other dimensions of life as a global society. These oppressive elements can also be found in the internal forum, in our individual and collective psyche, in our received cultural attitudes and ways of seeing, even, or perhaps especially in our religiously motivated habits of mind and of behavior. Wherever these

oppressive elements may be located, rather than just passively putting up with them, taking an active stance of resisting them becomes a transformative power, a subversive force that can undermine and hopefully ultimately overcome these prevailing oppressive structures in our public and private lives.

“Forgive, but do not forget,” the Dalai Lama advises us. If this suggestion were to be uttered by anyone else, giving Holocaust survivors “advice” on what to do with the horrendous crimes perpetrated by the Nazis and their allies and supporters against the entire Jewish people and against humanity, it would be dismissed outright. But beholding the stature of the one who is uttering this, and what he and his people have been through and are still struggling with, and how it is costing him and his people, one is more readily disposed to lend an ear.

This is nothing at all like cheap grace, a platitude that is easily mouthed by anyone from the sidelines who would prefer to avoid the oppressively immobilizing matter at hand and come out smelling like a rose in the midst of a garbage pile. This is a state of mind reached, if at all, only with years and years of unflagging practice, of going deep into one’s own being, clearing through the debris that one’s individual psyche and self-centered egoistic identity, and finding an opening that leads out to a vast expanse, an infinite horizon of unconditional love.

Forgive, but never forget. Neither can this utterance be taken as a state of mind that makes light or sets aside the demands of justice, for restitution, even for a condemnation of the heinous acts and murderous structures embodied in the likes of the Nazi regime, apartheid, the various forms of genocide throughout history, and so on, that poisoned the minds and hearts of so many “decent” people who otherwise would be characterized as persons of “good will.” This may not ignore or set aside the enormous task facing us as a global community in working toward a different kind of world for all of us and of our children. What do we do in such a world where the scandalously rich get even richer, while the vast sectors of the middle class and the multitudes of the poor, who now live on survival mode, are deprived of even the basics of a decent human life and are progressively losing the little that they still have? What do we do when those who actively promote the arms race and fan the flames of war and conflict continue in their astute ways of exacerbating the sense of global insecurity, calling for “protective measures” that would call for more arms and assure their own profit? What do we do, as we witness with shock how our Earth is on the verge of ecological destruction in a seemingly irreversible process that relegates thousands of living species to extinction on an annual basis, and with the more and more palpably observable effects of global climate change threatening the stability and sustainability of our societies throughout the world? We cannot afford to forget, as long as the work of rectifying injustice, the arduous work of striving toward the transformation of minds and hearts as well as of our political, social, economic, and other human-made structures keeps confronting us right in our face. This truly seems to be an impossible task given our human propensities, and so forgiveness does not seem to be the order of the day.

I once had an opportunity to be in the same company with a well-known Palestinian leader, a respected intellectual and advocate of his people’s cause, at a symposium on “Love and Forgiveness.” Asked how he viewed this theme from the experience of his own people, his response was, “Love is there, but forgiveness? We’re working on it.” Those are the words of one who continues to be in the middle of the conflict, in the never-ending struggle for justice and equality and for a state of affairs we can only strive for.

A conscientious reader, or any human being who seeks to live authentically and justly for that matter, cannot just set Wiesenthal’s question aside and say, “I wasn’t there, this has nothing

to do with me.” Can anyone of us say, “the Shoah (“Holocaust”) has nothing to do with me, so I do not have to face that question Wiesenthal poses”? Or for that matter, can we say this as we put before us what we now know of Mao’s Red Purge, Stalin’s Gulag, Pol Pot’s Killing Fields, Bosnia, Rwanda, and so many other incidents of mass atrocities and murder of innocent people, just to mention those perpetrated over the last century? A series of events that looms large in my own mind at this point is the torture, rape, murder, dismemberment of hundreds of women between the ages of ten and thirty in Juarez, Mexico in the recent years. Can we say this of so many any other events in our human history involving violence by humans against other humans for political, economic, ethnic, religious, personal, or a combination of so many other reasons, on a large or small scale, that has occurred and continues to occur on this Earth of ours, that “I was not there, this has nothing to do with me”?

Consider the state of our contemporary global society, and we find violence staring us in the face. Right at this moment, in different parts of the world, countless numbers of our fellow human beings continue to live under the threat of armed violence, whether from state-organized or other forms of open or clandestine warfare, to gun related violence arising from hatred or conflict between human beings or groupings. Millions of our fellow human beings in different parts of the world are uprooted from their homes for fear of their lives due to political, ethnic, economic, as well as other causes and live as refugees in search of a stable place to rebuild their lives. What’s more, an estimated twenty thousand children under the age of five die daily of causes related to hunger and malnutrition.

More and more human beings are adversely affected by the ecological destruction being perpetrated upon the Earth, our shared habitat, by our unsustainable lifestyles in our industrialized society. This is not to mention the devastation wrought upon thousands of living species relegated to extinction annually. Throughout all this, collectively we continue to ravage the Earth’s resources, rampantly digging up minerals fossil fuels, approaching a point of foreseeable depletion of these natural resources. At the same time, we dump our toxic wastes on the land, air, and sea, to a degree that has begun to have noticeable effects on the Earth’s overall balance of life and on global climatic conditions. In short, we find ourselves in an overall state of dysfunction and dis-ease, a global *dukkha* that affects all of us inhabiting this Earth.³ Given all these interconnected facets of violence in our deeply wounded global community, we find it harder and harder to deny that we are heading toward a disastrous scenario for our collective future.

Here it may be helpful to distinguish three levels of violence that prevail in our global community, as physical violence, structural violence, and ecological violence. One way or the other, we may be able to identify as victims affected by this violence on its many levels. At the same time, as we closely examine ourselves in our concrete socio-economic, political, cultural, ecological, and other contexts, we may also be able to recognize and acknowledge our roles as perpetrators of this violence to varying degrees of involvement and responsibility.

The cartoon character Pogo famously said, “We have met the Enemy, and he is us.”⁴ Similarly, surveying the state of our global community and examining our role in all of this, the victim meets the perpetrator, and comes to realize, “I am that.”

Vietnamese Buddhist monk, spiritual teacher, and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh wrote a well-cited poem that opens our eyes to a different horizon than the kind we are accustomed to as we live our busy self-centered lives.

“Call Me By My True Names” contains the following passages:

*... I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river,
and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time to eat the mayfly.
I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond, and
I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence, feeds itself on the frog.
I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones, my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda.
I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate,
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.
I am a member of the politburo, with plenty of power in my hands,
and I am the man who has to pay his "debt of blood" to my people,
dying slowly in a forced labor camp.⁵*

The poem points directly to the depths within the very hearts of each one of us, as we are able to pay attention in silence to this intimate place within us, that place where the walls of separation between “myself” and “my enemy” has been overcome and has given way, not to some euphoric and imagined state of “oneness,” but rather to the deeply seated and soul-searing pain in both victim and perpetrator. This shared pain is called “com-*passion*,” literally, “suffering-with.” This is not some fuzzy feeling of commiseration for another’s suffering from a detached, lofty standpoint, but rather a state of being wracked in intense pain crying out to the heavens, and yet a state of being paradoxically also marked by indescribable and inscrutable equanimity coming with an acceptance of the fact that *I am that, in the midst of it all*, that I bear responsibility for it all. This is a peace within oneself that does not mean the lack of turmoil and struggle in life. Nor is it a peace based on any resolution of the painful or impossible situation. One might almost say, this is a non-human kind of inner peace, peace truly beyond understanding, peace that the world cannot give. Indeed, this is beyond human comprehension, unrealistic, perhaps beyond what is conceivably possible.

There is a spiritual exercise in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, described in 8th century monk Shantideva’s work titled, *Guide to the Way of the Bodhisattva*, called “Exchange of Self and Other,” found in the eighth chapter of this work. We cannot go into detail on the intricacies of this exercise, which comes as a culminating point of a series of practices that guide those in the path to awakening and the cultivation of wisdom and compassion. In rough summary, it involves placing oneself in the shoes of an Other and learning to see everything from this standpoint. This spiritual practice of “Exchange of Self and Other” can be engaged in only as one has matured in meditative and contemplative practice after a considerable period of time. In daring to take this practice on, though, it may bring one to a totally new level of awareness, perhaps even a different level of being. This is the kind of exercise that we can imagine must have propelled and empowered the Tibetan monk in the Dalai Lama’s account and, most likely, the Dalai Lama himself. Needless to say, such an exercise is not offered to anyone indiscriminately, not for beginners, not for those of us still struggling with the hurts and pains of having been a victim of violence and festering with thoughts of revenge on the Perpetrator.

Notwithstanding, the practice of “Exchange of Self and Other” invites one who feels ready to put oneself in the place of the perpetrators who have committed unspeakable crimes. In doing so, we are not thereby seeking to find an “excuse” for their behavior, nor to wallow in sentimental fantasy of their own tortuous and complicated lives that put them in the role they found themselves as perpetrators. It is neither to exonerate them nor to dole out cheap grace for them, conjuring a quasi-sympathetic sentiment of “understanding their situation that led them to do those deeds.” It is instead to look squarely at reality from the very standpoint, earnestly,

from the heart of these individuals and of all the individuals in history who have committed acts harmful to others as well as themselves. It is to assume culpability for all those acts and to sit in silence, in horror perhaps, to gaze intently at all this, and to embrace it in our hearts and our entire being. And perhaps, as we do sit there and take all this and hold it in our hearts, weighed down by the enormity of it all, we may simply be led to admit our powerlessness, acknowledging our complicity, and weep bitterly, as Peter wept after he realized he had betrayed Jesus three times. (Luke 22:62)

The spiritual exercise noted above invites us to truly see what this is saying to us, as we recall instances of pain and suffering brought about by human conflicts, and also as we behold the enormously complex and tremendously heavy tasks we face as a global family, asking ourselves, “What have I done that caused all this” and then, “what can I do in the face of this?” In asking this in earnest, I may be moved to chant the verse that Buddhist practitioners recite together in the ritual concluding their meditative silence: *“All harmful karma ever committed by me since of old, on account of my beginningless greed, anger and ignorance, borne of my body mouth and consciousness, now I atone it all.”*

The thought comes: *Atone? I, atone? I, atone it all?* How can I be as preposterous as to utter this? I once attended a meditation session and listened to a talk by a Zen Master in upstate New York, who addressed this question. He clarified that in this chant, “atone” is used in a way different from the way many Christians use the term in their own religious tradition. It does not at all mean “getting off the hook” because somebody else, someone who happens to be the Son of God, has taken the rap on my behalf, by taking upon himself the punishment deserved by dying on the cross for the sins of humanity. This in rough outline seems to be what many Christians understand by “atonement” in Christian tradition. To use this “doctrine of atonement” to get a free ride to heaven seems to be nothing more than cheap grace facilely doled out to those seeking a way out of the enormous weight of our human condition.

In his talk, the Zen Master pointed out that the word as used by Buddhists in this ritual chant needs to be taken with a hyphen in the middle: “at-one.” In short, to “atone it all” is to realize that I am AT-ONE with all the harmful karma ever committed, not just by myself as an individual, but by all sentient beings since the beginning of life in the universe up to this point in time. In realizing that I am at-one with all this, in realizing *I am that*, I dare to proclaim that I am ready to open myself to take responsibility for all that and open myself to bear the consequences of it all in my own being.

The only way to be at-one, to “atone,” may be to accept my guilt, as the perpetrator, bear the consequences, and be ready to burn in hell forever. And accepting my responsibility for all this is simply to accept the karmic burden of my acts upon myself. Ironically enough, doing so may be the only way I can find peace within myself, accepting my fate to burn in hell for all the harmful karma I have imposed on our fellow human beings and on myself. There are stories of once hardened criminals who, having realized the immensity of the crimes they have committed, seek to find peace by taking upon themselves the full punishment they feel they deserve.⁶ They would rather jump into hell, suffer as much as their bodies and minds and entire being will allow, and thereby find peace within themselves by doing so, than seek refuge for themselves in an undeserved heaven. Here the Christian doctrine of Christ’s descent into hell comes to mind, a hardly noticed or sometimes omitted item in the Apostle’s creed. Its point seems to be that there is Good News of salvation, even to those in the midst of hell!

There are indeed some deeds so horrendous that we humans can demand nothing less than that the perpetrators burn in hell forever. This very thought is perhaps too easily used as a

supporting argument for the Christian doctrine of Hell. Even with God's boundless love for all us, having been created in God's own image, which gives each of us our infinite worth, we have a choice. If we choose to reject that love and choose to go against it, doing harm to ourselves and to whoever is in our way, our freedom to do so is respected, and we bear the consequences of our choice. And yet, "the forgiveness of sins" is also a longstanding Christian doctrine, recited in the Apostle's Creed. This means that no matter how unimaginably horrible a willfully committed act or series of acts may be, the forgiveness that not any human, but that only the unfathomable mystery of God's bounty and grace can provide, is there, even for the most hardened of us, to seek refuge, when so moved from the heart. This is an affirmation in faith; somehow that wide, open, and infinite horizon of unconditional love is there, even for those individuals whom we cannot imagine as deserving of it, including ourselves.

"Now I atone it all." An audacious utterance indeed, no less audacious than the utterance of Zen Buddhist practitioners of meditation when they together recite the four vows of the Bodhisattva (Being-toward-Enlightenment) in the closing chant ritual:

*Sentient beings are numberless. I vow to free them.
Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them.
The Dharma Gates are boundless, I vow to master them.
The Enlightened Way is unsurpassable, I vow to embody it.*

The impossible situation of our global *dukkha* draws forth an impossible vow, an impossible dream. How can I, this puny, limited, self-centered being that I am, dare make such vows and mean it? And this is precisely where the sacramental power that this ritual utterance harbors within itself, given the earnest intent of the one proclaiming it, is activated and made manifest: in so daring to proclaim the above as my intention, as my vow, as my (impossible) dream if you will, I am taking myself beyond this puny, limited, self-absorbed being I tend to be and putting on the mind and heart of all the Awakened and Compassionate Ones and all Bodhisattvas, past, present, and future. It is this mind and heart of the Awakened, and not the ordinary mind of my puny little insecure self, that proclaims this *in me and through me*. I thereby open myself to being at-one with that infinite horizon of boundless compassion that bears the burden of the world's harmful karma.

As I take on upon myself this monumental weight of humanity's harmful karma, I am bound to be crushed by this unbearable burden and can only open my arms in total surrender. The only word that bursts out is a cry of total abandonment from the depths of my being, not unlike what a Man on the Cross is said to have uttered in those agonizing moments: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Matthew 27:46) This is a cry from the depths, a cry from Hell itself no less.

The figure of this Jewish man, an itinerant preacher who some two thousand years ago walked the villages of Galilee and gained a small following of men and women through the power of his words and the magnetic impact of his life, comes to the fore. Branded as a subversive element by the Jewish religious leaders of his time, he was brought to judgment before the Roman authorities and condemned to death. On the verge of a cruel and ignominious death as he hung upon a wooden cross, the form of capital punishment used in those times, arms outstretched, he is also said to have uttered in a loud voice, with his face upwards to heaven, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) While one of the thieves nailed on the cross by his side reviled him, the other one could not even look him in the face, knowing his own guilt. To this man, his message was clear. "Today you are with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43)

What is the point here? Many followers of this man, Jesus, called the Christ, who now all together make up the biggest religious community in the world and comprise around one-fifth of the world's total population, may readily repeat his words and in facile and even irresponsible ways use them in their own favor to avoid confronting the matter at hand and getting off with self-absolutions. It is easy to take the doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins as a means of escaping the responsibilities of genuine atonement that can enable the healing of the deep, unimaginable wounds of our innumerable sisters and brothers, and of our entire Earth, and getting an easy ride to an afterlife in Heaven.

For those of us tempted to find an easy way out by mouthing a platitude, by citing Scriptural texts or the sublime words of others, we are first invited to gaze again at that Figure on the Cross and listen in our hearts. We may come to understand then that He is there not as a scapegoat, not as the whipping boy that God used to give us all a free ride, but as an invitation for all of us, whether Christian or not, to take on the wounds of our humanity together, seeking true at-one-ment.

As we continue contemplating this Figure on the Cross, a new horizon may open up that may bridge the chasm separating the victim from the perpetrator, the humanly unbridgeable gap between my "self" and my "neighbor" upon which our social, political, economic, and other dimensions of life are built. In embracing the world's suffering with open arms on the Cross, embracing victim as well as perpetrator, the man from Galilee opened up this horizon for all of us, a horizon of grace, a horizon of hope.

At an interfaith gathering held in Munich, Germany that I was privileged to attend, part of the program involved a visit to the nearby site of the former Dachau concentration camp, now open to visitors as a memorial and a museum. After walking through the various areas of the Dachau site, with the help of a guide who described to us the various facets of the suffering and agony of the more than two hundred thousand prisoners of the camp during the Nazi era, we were hosted for tea by the Catholic nuns of the Carmelite Order who had established a convent adjacent to the site. Participants of our interfaith gathering, which involved around thirty religious leaders and scholars of the three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), and what the organizers termed the Dharmic faiths (Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism), were able to sit in a big circle with some of the Carmelite nuns who hosted us and engage in a heart to heart conversation.

A participant from our interfaith group asked the question of the nuns, "So what is it you do here?" In response, the Prioress and several nuns shared from their hearts about their life of prayer and contemplation, in solidarity especially with the victims of Dachau and of all those who suffered and died in the Nazi concentration camps, and likewise of all the victims of human violence perpetrated by other humans throughout history. They pointed to Jesus on the Cross as their inspiration, as one who had taken upon himself the sufferings of all humanity throughout all time, in atonement for the sins of humankind. They also derived inspiration from one of the pillars of their Order, St. Teresa of Avila, who gives detailed descriptions of the life of contemplation in her written works, consumed by the love of God.⁷

In the course of the exchange with the nuns, one participant brought up the uncomfortable question of the controversy surrounding their sister convent in Auschwitz, criticized for insensitivity, in setting up Christian symbols right there adjacent to the site of the abject humiliation, intolerable suffering, and extermination of countless numbers of the Jewish populace perpetrated by (self-described Christian) Nazis. The nuns were aware of this issue and

took the question head on, noting also the fact that Joseph Mengele, noted for his inhuman experiments on the inmates of concentration camp in the name of “scientific knowledge,” was a devout Catholic who went to Mass regularly, among others. It was conveyed that the nuns included the Perpetrators in their prayers of atonement and reconciliation, in solidarity with all who were victimized by those perpetrators in their untold suffering. The Figure on the Cross kept looming on the horizon, with his prayer uttered before he breathed his last, “Father, Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)

Several of the respondents in *The Sunflower* emphatically noted that, in the face of immense violence suffered by our fellow human beings, we humans have neither the power nor the right to forgive. As my Palestinian activist friend noted of himself and of his people, we need to keep working on this throughout our lives. In the end, forgiveness may be something beyond us, and we can only entrust it to a horizon surrounded in an unfathomable mystery of unconditional Love that embraces us all. In his last cry before he dies, asking for forgiveness for his perpetrators, the Man on the Cross opens to us a glimpse of a horizon that is totally beyond our human comprehension. This is the horizon that Christians point to as they recite in the Apostle’s Creed, “I believe...in the forgiveness of sins.” The unsaid part of this is, “even those sins we humans deem to be unforgivable.” The Roman centurion, beholding the Man on the Cross, must have had a glimpse of this horizon, as he exclaimed, “Surely, this is the Son of God.” (Mark 15:39)

I am the Nazi soldier... I am the prisoner of the concentration camp... I am the corporate executive spearheading my company’s ventures for profit above all... I am the mother with nothing to feed my children, because we lost our land to the banana corporation... I am the advertising agent trying to sell my company’s products with enticing slogans, astutely using half-truths and misleading imagery... I am the customer enticed to want this product... I am the employee of the arms factory needing this job to support my family... I am the three year old girl killed accidentally in gunfire in a gang-infested neighborhood... I am the gang member finding a sense of belonging in hanging out with these tough guys... I am the storeowner who needs to pay “protection” money to the gangs, and who needs to jack up the prices to make up for it... I am victim... I am the perpetrator... I am the victim... I am the perpetrator...

This is the same horizon that the Tibetan monk imprisoned by the Chinese is pointing out to us, which bleeds out of his life of earnest, assiduous lifelong spiritual practice. It is the horizon that sustains the Dalai Lama as he continues to inspire his people to bear the unbearable, while providing a vision to a way of peace that embraces the oppressor and forging the path to a shared future. It is the horizon that we are all invited to open ourselves to and see how it may transform our own lives and give us a ray of hope against hope, in living the Now toward an alternative future together.

Christians who look to the Man on the Cross as a ticket to cheap grace and “getting off the hook” in a “salvation in the next life” may have some important things to learn from Buddhists. The message and invitation of salvation, of healing, of wholeness, is right here being presented before us, as we learn to appreciate and embody in our own lives the arduous yet liberating path of “at-one-ment” for the wounds of our Earth community.

For all of us seeking a way out of this messy, wounded world with all of us entangled in a complicated and interconnected web as victims and perpetrators, this message of at-one-ment may provide a key. Whether Buddhist or Christian or Hindu, Muslim, Jew, Sikh, Baha’i, or agnostic or atheist or humanist, whatever belief system we may hold to sustain our fragile lives

or whatever label we may go by in marking our social identity, this message seems to be addressed to all of us. Allowing this horizon to open up and shed light on the way we see ourselves, as members of a global family whose destinies are inevitably and intimately tied up with one another's, we may be able to work together to forge a less violent, more equitable, ecologically sustainable future for ourselves and for our children and down the generations.

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¹ This is a thoroughly revised and rewritten essay based on an earlier draft, entitled "Confronting Impossible and Violent Situations: Buddhist, and also Christian Musings on Love and Forgiveness," submitted for a volume with other papers from a symposium on the theme *Love and Forgiveness in the Humanities* held at the University of Notre Dame-Louaize in Beirut, Lebanon (edited by Edward Alam, publication forthcoming).

² Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. With a Symposium edited by Harry James Cargaas and Benny V. Fetterman. Revised and Expanded Edition. (New York: Schocken Books, 1998).

³ *Dukkha*, the First Noble Truth of Buddhism, often translated as "suffering," describes our human condition of dissatisfactoriness and dysfunction, from the image of a wheel being badly aligned. Its opposite is *sukha*, a state of well-being and happiness, whereby the wheel is centered and functioning properly.

⁴ By cartoonist Walt Kelly, 1913-1973. First used for a poster on Earth Day 1970, which appeared in a strip of Pogo soon afterwards, later used as a book title for a collection of Kelly's works published shortly before his death in 1973.

⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh*. (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996).

⁶ Albert Speer, one of the architects of the Nazi regime and Hitler's minister of armaments, accepted responsibility for actions of the Nazis and was sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment. Invited to contribute to *The Sunflower*, he declares, "I can never forgive myself for recklessly and unscrupulously supporting a regime that carried out the systematic murder of Jews and other groups of people. My moral guilt is not subject to the statute of limitations, it cannot be erased in my lifetime." (p. 245).

⁷ (Though this was not brought up in the conversation, St. Teresa is also noted for saying that, given the choice between an eternal life in a Heaven of bliss for herself and an eternal destiny of suffering in Hell out of the love of God, she would choose the latter.)

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