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Reflective Insight: "Emotional Metamorphosis"

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Robert Melatti

Emotional Metamorphosis

My professor asks: After seeing Auschwitz, how I continue on? How has going there affected me?

Starting with the second question first, perhaps the essence of the answer could be found in a comment that Cali, my granddaughter made to her grandmother a couple of days ago. “Grandpa seems sad since he came back from his trip,” she exclaimed. I really had not noticed any change and assumed that any uneasiness in my disposition had all to do with work and School Board and moving and the upcoming arena conversations that I am part of. It was my wife who said that a dose of introspection might be in order. During our trip, Dr. Finley asked me how I felt emotionally about my experiences and I replied that certainly there was much to think about but that for the most part I had not personally experienced that agony which I had witnessed etched on the faces bathed in tears of many of some of the others students both in and outside of our group during the tour of the various sites both in Paris and in Poland. I did, however, relive many of my life’s interaction with Jews; the corner candy store in my neighborhood that was run by a mother and her two sons who wore short sleeve shirts revealing the tattoos of the Auschwitz camp, the Hassidic Jews who would read the *Vorwitz* each morning on the subway ride to Brooklyn folding the newspaper like an exercise in origami and the Bolshoi Ballet visit to the Met in 1966 when Maxi Yarus, a refugee Jewish stagehand yelled at the ballet troop in Russian that they should defect! There were so many more intersections – so many! Dr. Finley reiterated her own experience about her first visit to Auschwitz and how it had taken time for all the component feelings to arrange themselves in some kind of emotional order that then allowed her to comprehend the totality of what she had seen, felt, heard and imagined. It may be safe to say that I may be going through the same emotional metamorphosis and that the changes wrought by my personal visitation may manifest themselves slowly but to no less of an end in understanding the enormity of the Shoah. Perhaps because I have lived sixty-six years and have seen and experienced my own share of “dark” episodes and have known about this chapter in history for most of my life, it represents a lesser part of the whole when all of life’s shocking and uncomfortable experiences are aggregated in some metaphorical blender. But just like mixing liquids of differing viscosities, when left to sit, undisturbed, they arrange themselves at various levels of thickness and each can be seen and mentally “categorized” for what it truly represents in one’s personal library of life experiences.

The first question, a close cousin to the second, begs to explain how this will impact one's life. Will it shake us off our "jack in the box" of pent up prejudices forcing a better introspection of how we really feel about diversity and why? For me, the trip and the memory and artifacts of the Shoah was an opportunity to look into own heart and soul; it offered a chance to re-visit my own biases and in that exercise it gave me a chance to try to gain some understanding about the reasons how this could have happened. But it did happen and perhaps the true essence of human nature could be reflected in the "Portrait of Dorian Gray" that each of us keeps covered in the attics and the basements of our collective humanity. How much "wind" does it take to blow the cover off the portrait to reveal the underlying potential for the unimaginable? Perhaps one day I can explain to my granddaughter what I saw and felt and teach her as she grows to embrace diversity and all its wonder.