

I Vow to Be Diversity

By Bernie Glassman
Bearing Witness, Bell Tower, NY 1996

If we could live in the world as if everything and every-one is Buddha, or Christ, or the divine, we would take care of each situation that arises in a natural and spontaneous way. But almost all of us exclude someone or something. It might be a person of a darker or lighter skin color, someone with a strong body odor because she lives on the streets and hasn't washed in several weeks, or someone coming at you with a knife. Or, as we saw during our time at Auschwitz, it could be someone from a different nationality or religion doing something we don't like. It happens moment after moment. Most of the time we're not even aware of it.

In his preface to his poignant account *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi wrote this: "Many people-many nations-can find themselves holding, more or less wittingly, that 'every stranger is an enemy'"

When we see someone who doesn't look like us, who has different customs from ours, and who speaks a strange language, a slow process of dehumanization begins. We may not consciously think badly of him or even wish him harm, but we don't believe that he is quite as human as we are. This is often a subtle process, and noticing it requires attention, honesty, and sensitivity. Sometimes it's not subtle at all, and people begin to act out of these conceptions, denying others basic rights and freedoms. And when they do, Levi says, "then, at the end of the chain, there is the Lager [the concentration camp]." Auschwitz happened because human beings condemned to death others who were different from them. And though I had practiced the vow to be diversity for many years, that vow took on added significance for me after Auschwitz.

As we discovered at our retreat, it's very hard to accept differences. You might think that a group like ours, many of them peacemakers, many of them religious practitioners, would have had an easy time of it, but that is not the case. Sometimes the spiritual search after oneness becomes a search for sameness, and some-times even a search for sameness with me.

I recently heard about a United Nations study that found that of some fifty-five wars currently being waged in the world today, two thirds are due to religious differences. What this often means is that two groups of people who believe in some form of unity are fighting each other. Both see that unity in their own image. What they don't see is the variety of life. They're comfortable with one thing, not many.

That's why we take the vow to be diversity. For diversity is the other side of oneness. It is the world of form in all its infinite variety of textures, colors, contrasts and differences. Not only are we different from each other, but everything is different from one moment to the next-everything is change. We are all part of one single unity, but we're also very

different. We can't do peacemaking in the world-in fact, we can't do anything effective in the world-without taking our differences into account.

Several years ago I met Bobbie Louise Hawkins, a writer who at that time was teaching in Boulder, Colorado. She asked her students to eavesdrop on conversations. These conversations could be taking place on the street, in an elevator, or in a store. Her students had to write the conversation down verbatim and then read it out loud. In her performances, Hawkins read conversations overheard at hotels, on the streets, even in insane asylums. People were amazed at the many voices they heard-not just the different thoughts or feelings being expressed but also the different nuances, words, and sounds. What they heard is the world of diversity.

It's very important to appreciate life in all its different manifestations, in all its manyness. People who focus too much on the oneness of life without seeing its diversity will sometimes establish a single standard for what is human. When we vow to be diversity we vow to work with all forms of life. We work with them by becoming them, by seeing their point of view and looking at life through their individual perspective. No matter who we work with, it's impossible to be an effective peacemaker without taking differences into account.

Vowing to be harmony, I accept that oneness and diversity are the same thing. Does that sound like a contradiction? Yet that is exactly what happened during our Auschwitz retreat. In honoring our diversity, we discovered our oneness. By accepting our differences, we came together as one people.

In doing so we didn't lose our differences. Jews remained Jews, Buddhists remained Buddhists, Germans remained Germans, and so on. And yet, in the end, we were one people. ~