

Letter to Psychotherapists Everywhere

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A note to depth psychotherapists everywhere, written May 13, 2004, as stories of prisoner abuse by Americans in Iraq grow more gruesome each day and an American is beheaded while his killers utter a Muslim prayer:

The day ended yesterday with a psychotherapy group. The group started with a comment from one of its members about how overwhelmed and despairing she was feeling about things in the world right now. Her comment opened the floodgates so that everyone in the group seemed to relate in one way or another to what she had said. A common theme was that of felt powerlessness. I found myself wondering what it would have been like to be running a therapy group a few blocks downwind from the ovens of a concentration camp in 1943. Would people talk about it? If one brave soul spoke up, would it open the floodgates for everyone?

The group opened a crack in my defenses, and I found myself increasingly frightened and despairing as the evening went on. I kept a date I had with my wife to watch a movie (a light comedy), went to bed, fell asleep easily, and had a nightmare that seemed to last for hours. I awoke from the nightmare, which had an Alzheimer's quality of being enormously frustrated and frightened about being lost in a familiar place and not sure I would ever find my way home, and lay awake for a long time. During that time I prayed a lot, which helped a little.

I got to the office this morning and said my usual prayers before my first appointment of the day. These prayers center around a request to God to be with us in healing here this day. As I said my prayers today, I realized that I did not only mean the healing of the individual psych-spiritual wounds of me and my clients; I meant it in a much larger sense. I meant the healing of the psycho-spiritual wounds that are driving the acting out of savage violence around the world. And I realized that I want to feel joined with all of you in that intention. I sincerely believe that what we do can be very significant on a larger scale. Of course, that belief may in part be a reactivation of my defenses against feeling powerless, but it is not only that.