

The power of silence in the sunflower

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The Power of Silence in The Sunflower In The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness, Simon Wiesenthal asks the reader's personal opinion on the act of forgiveness.

Are there crimes so heinous that forgiveness cannot be granted? What must the guilty party do or feel in order to earn the forgiveness of the wronged? And perhaps the most haunting question, what would you have done in his situation? In essence, what are the possibilities and limits of forgiveness? But within Wiesenthal's narrative and the responses, another theme transcends the opinions and the words: silence. More than anything Wiesenthal's story teaches us the power of silence, a power which grants respect, confesses that man is not omniscient and recognizes that sometimes humans are helpless. Wiesenthal's narrative tells the reader that sometimes silence is the only appropriate response. The Sunflower is the story of Simon Wiesenthal and his time in a Nazi concentration camp. Each day he wakes, he knows that it could be his last. One day his barrack is taken to his old school, which had been converted into a hospital for wounded Nazi soldiers, to do work on the grounds.

While he is eating lunch, a nurse tells him to come with her, and she leads him into an old classroom, now the death chamber of a Nazi soldier wrapped completely in bandages. The SS soldier begins to tell Wiesenthal his story. He is young, too young to die. He had joined the Hitler youth to the dismay of his parents. While in service in Poland he helped round up Jews.

He and the other soldiers locked them in a house and then set fire to the building. He shot the Jews who jumped from the windows to escape the

flames. He had been following orders. The memory, he says, haunts him. ““ It never ceases to remind me of the burning house and the family that jumped from the window”” (Wiesenthal 53). And then he says, ““ In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him.

Only I didn’t know whether there were any Jews left. . . I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace”” (Wiesenthal 54). In response, Wiesenthal leaves the room in silence.

“ At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room” (Wiesenthal 55). Silence is a way for man to show his helplessness, intentionally or inadvertently. The SS man asks Wiesenthal to forgive him not only as an individual, but in the name of the Jews who burned in that house. Perhaps he is asking for Wiesenthal to forgive in the name of all Jews who were affected by the Holocaust. As a Jew imprisoned in a concentration camp for the foreseeable future until his death, Wiesenthal is hopeless and helpless.

“ One asks the other for help. But the other was himself helpless and able to do nothing for him” (Wiesenthal 55). Wiesenthal has nothing to give, he is helpless, and he has nothing more than the tangible pain that that the SS man has indirectly put upon him. The silence recognizes that there is nothing he can do: if he had answered the SS man, his words would have been empty. If the SS man was in fact asking Wiesenthal to forgive in the name of all Jews, then Wiesenthal’s silence states simply that he cannot forgive in the name of others.

The silence recognizes that forgiveness is an individual and voluntary gesture, and cannot be granted by any other than the wronged. Wiesenthal paints a scene of hopelessness within that death chamber. A scene where neither can atone for nor forgive the sins because both have nothing left to give. Wiesenthal's silence also is a humane gesture, especially in two parts of the book. First is while he is listening to the SS man's confession.

Wiesenthal remains silent throughout the gruesome tale, wanting to be anywhere but there at his bedside, but he still treats the soldier as a human.

Several times Wiesenthal goes out of his way to show kindness and compassion to the man. He helps him reach a water glass, picks up a fallen letter and brushes away flies hovering around the man's wounds." One wonders if, rather than empty words of forgiveness, such human acceptance was not far more what the SS man truly wanted and hoped for" (Qtd. In Wiesenthal 205). Perhaps the actions of kindness paired with silence did more for the spirit of the SS man than hollow words would have done.

Similarly, silence is synonymous with compassion when Wiesenthal goes to visit the soldier's mother. His mother is heartbroken at the death of her son; she can't believe what she hears of the sins of the SS men and believes that her son was a good, moral person until the end. Wiesenthal experiences an internal struggle of whether or not to tell the woman the truth. But in the end he finally decides. " I took my leave without diminishing in any way the poor woman's last surviving consolidation—faith in the goodness of her son" (Wiesenthal 94).

Once again, silence on a matter is an effect of the compassion and kindness for fellow man that Wiesenthal shows. Silence is also important to those who read Wiesenthal's story, especially when responding to the question: what would you do? Most who read *The Sunflower* are already familiar with the tragedies of the Holocaust, but Wiesenthal's account reaffirms the atrocious nature of the event. In the eyes of an individual, to whom the reader can relate, the reader realizes the enormity of the Holocaust's impact. One already knows of the sheer number of the affected but now also realizes that behind each number is a story, just as remarkable and as terrible as Wiesenthal's own. That being said, observing silence as a response is a sign of respect. Man asks questions because he feels that by rationalizing enough, he can somehow reach the right conclusion.

But for questions concerning something so heinous, atrocious, extraordinary and personal as the Holocaust, there is no cookie cutter solution to be reached. By analyzing the situation, man diminishes the fact that the Holocaust (and other events like it) are so terrible and so unique that they are beyond rational contemplation. By holding these crimes in awe and recognizing that they transcend normal laws of humanity, we maintain the importance and gravity of the event. We learn to respect it and the people who were involved: "There are many questions for which answers would remove the moral force of the question." (Qtd.

in Wiesenthal 202). Perhaps our feelings of discomfort and confusion are answer enough. "There are matters that perhaps should always remain unanswered; question which should lie like a great weight on our consciences so that we continually feel an obligation to confront their

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insistent urging” (Qtd. in Wiesenthal 202). Finally, by observing silence we recognize our own humanity.

At the beginning of Wiesenthal’s story, before he meets the SS man, he tells how the camp inmates could speak to people in the village outside the gates. They would ask them for news. One day they got the news—” God is on leave” (Wiesenthal 8). After observing his surroundings, his situation and his future he says, “ God must be away. And He has no deputy” (Wiesenthal 9). For many people of diverse religions, their faith in their God defines them.

Most of us are told to trust in our God. So when a person is being persecuted terribly because of their God and because of their faith, and each day the news gets worse, it may seem like God is not listening. If there is no hope on the horizon, it may seem that God is on leave. God did not speak out against the atrocities. He is silent.

This also applies to the response to Wiesenthal’s question: What would you do? When we look back to the fact of the Holocaust, how can we answer for it? By keeping silent, we confess that we are human and not God. There may be things beyond our capacities. We admit that we do not have the answers. “ Perhaps there was a moment –one which you and millions of others experienced—which was so beyond the pale of comprehension that even God was silent. If God was silent, dare any of us speak?” (Qtd.

in Wiesenthal 203) The Sunflower is riddled with question, doubts and varying answers, but all this may point to the importance of silence. Silence acknowledges that there sometimes is no set answer. It says that some things are beyond human contemplation and silence grants a certain amount

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of respect. It is a sign of uncertainty and helplessness. Often silence speaks louder than words. When there seems to be no answers to fit a situation, when no words seem right, sometimes silence is the best response.

As Hubert Locke says in response to Wiesenthal's question, " No. I cannot answer your question of right or wrong; your silence was your answer and perhaps it should be ours as well. (Qtd. in Wiesenthal 20) Works cited 1. Wiesenthal, Simon.

The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness. New York: Schocken Books inc., 1997. Print.